THE MOTTO of MRS. McLANE

by SHIRLEY CARSON

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THE STORY OF AN AMERICAN FARM

BY

SHIRLEY CARSON

NEW YORK
GEORGE H. DORAN COMPANY

DEDICATED TO

MY HUSBAND

AND

TO ALL THOSE NIGHTS BY THE CAMP-FIRE

AND THE DAYS ON INDIAN TRAILS

WHERE I LISTENED TO AND LEARNED THESE THINGS

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THE MOTTO OF MRS. McLANE

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CHAPTER I

"I AIN'T denyin' I've got childern o' my own," said Mrs. McLane, slamming the oven-door on a couple of pies; "and I'm not sayin' but what Ena's comin' here will be an extry expense. I thought that all out, turnin' and twistin' in the dark last night with that everlastin' toe o' mine. Yet I don't see any way but to have her here. Countin' her mother as my sister, which she warn't, Ena has got a sort o' right to look to me for a home."

"She's got more right to look to others," said Dick sullenly. "Ena has got closer relatives than her mother's step-sister, and people who are better able to take care of her, too."

"The child'll get taken care of here all

right. At least, she'll go in with the rest o' you, and I can't promise more'n that. No woman on a farm has time to train her children in a fancy way, and for the matter o' that, I'm no believer in it."

"That's not the point, mother. You know we're not the first who should be asked to do this——"

"We've done it now, anyway," snapped Mrs. McLane triumphantly. "If other people neglect their duty, it's no reason why I should take pattern by 'em. I've made it a point all my life to give the helpin' hand to whatever come along, and it's no time to put wool in my ear when it's the case of a child that calls me aunt. Ena has got her father's folks, I know, but they don't seem to want her, and a girl o' thirteen can't manage for herself. If you do your duty, Dick, you'll hitch up the buggy this minute. The train gets in at four o'clock, and you've eight miles to drive."

Dick uncurled his long legs from the wood-

box, and stood for a moment watching his mother trim off a third pie.

"What'll father say?" he asked. "You know you've fixed up this whole business without a word from him."

"Your father's not here to say a word," answered Mrs. McLane complacently, "and when he gets back he'll see that nothin' else could ha' been done. Six childern ain't so much more'n five, when you come to think of it. Ena bein' here'll make you boys feel you've got a sister."

"She'll not care about us for brothers, though," Dick blurted out, saying the thing that had been in his thoughts for the last few minutes. "That's what I'm trying to show you, mother. Ross has seen it all along. You can tell by her letters that Ena's had a better bringing-up than us. You'll most likely find her a lady."

"You'll discover she'll be glad enough to wear a calico dress and a sun-bonnet, even if she's been used to finer things in Californy.

With her father and mother dead, and the folks out there tryin' to turn their backs on her, I'm not expectin' to find the child a peacock. I guess you boys have got manners enough for her. Ploughin' and sortin' pertaters don't make for cityfied ways, I know, but Ena'll be glad enough to find the roof of a farmhouse over her, I'm thinkin'. Now, you stop worryin' about nonsense and fill the wood-box for me afore you start."

Dick lounged to the sunny doorway and then paused again, his eye on the wood-pile. There, curled up behind the split logs and well screened from a view of the kitchen-window, lay the boy of scarcely fifteen, who was known as the "halfway one" of the McLane family. Dick looked at his mother again.

"It isn't particularly that I don't want Ena here, but it seems as if there was always something cropping up to prevent us getting a step forward. I'm nineteen, and I've never seen a pair o' shoes wearing off my feet yet without wondering if another

pair would be sure to come along after them. I've thought lately things could be a bit different. We ought to know what we can afford, and what we can't."

"You may know a thing, but you can't always take it into account." Mrs. McLane wiped the flour from her arms vigorously. "All you can do is to cast your bread upon the waters—what you've got—and trust the first tide'll bring it in again. You wouldn't shut up like a clam-shell just because you happen to be poor, would you?"

"I'd weigh things out more, and take note where helping one person hurts another. I'm thinking of Ross, who wants in the worst kind of a way to go to school. He works hard all the time with that one idea in his head, and it kind of worries me to have things done which put him farther from it. He's learned all the district school can teach him, and he knows it. Don't you see what I mean, mother?"

"I see that you're tormentin' the hand o'

Providence, which gives you what you get; and worryin' over things in the future that's not to be seen nor smelt yet. It's been my way to take what comes along, but you and Ross are for ever tryin' to stretch your necks across to-morrow and see what you can catch up with. It's no way to do."

Dick leaned against the lintel disconsolately.

"But I'd sift what came along," he persisted. "I'd weigh consequences."

"You'd wear spectacles all the time, and keep your nose on full scent, but that's not my way, and I don't know that people get on any better for bein' so pernickety. A good turn is a good turn, never mind the weighin' and the siftin' of it."

"You're awful set in your ways, mother."

"Land knows, I've had to be, with a husband to manage and five young ones to bring up, not to speak o' the farm. There's been no time for diddle-daddlin', and I guess I've got as good a head on my shoul-

ders as any of you. It beats me entirely to see the stand you've took over Ena's comin'. If you ain't got a smile to give her when she steps up, you best let Ross take the buggy. It sorter makes me feel ashamed to think the child's comin' to a place where she ain't entirely welcome."

"I told you I'm not talking altogether about Ena." Dick writhed as easily as most people under Mrs. McLane's reproach. "There's other things that haven't happened right. I got these thoughts started when that pedlar robbed you a year ago, and took the only good bit of jewellery you'd got."

"The Lord showed me no thief in his eye when he crawled up and asked for a night's rest. Would you have me harden my heart because o' that pedlar and his wicked ways? You had better leave the judgment o' such things to me, and have done with the thoughts I see in your mind. And if I'm to get my bakin' done in time the wood-box

must be filled this minute. All this foolish talk won't help the oven to heat."

A tremendous clatter of stove-lids helped to finish the last remark—a way Mrs. McLane had of giving triumphal emphasis to the end of an argument. Dick went out moodily to the wood-pile, and woke up the boy who was sleeping in the sun. The latter stretched himself, then rose alertly. Dick spoke without looking at him.

"I'm going to hitch up the buggy right away, and get over to Creston."

"Then she's coming?" Ross leaned his slender form against the logs, speaking quietly.

"She's most here, according to what mother says. I'd have you go to the depot, but I want to see Custer about the machinery we ordered. You'll have to do the chores alone to-night, and get them done early. We don't want a pile of work around when Ena's here."

The two boys looked at each other with

understanding. "Since she's coming we'll do what we can," Dick continued stoically. "She'll see what we are, and know she's got to sink or swim with us. I guess that before a week's out she may be wishing we hadn't been so ready with an invitation. Now I'm off."

Ross nodded, and watched the buggy out of sight. A vague apprehension and a subdued anticipation equally possessed him. He went about the work Dick had specified with a marvellous energy, and the result of his enthusiasm was that towards six o'clock that evening an unwonted peace reigned in the farmhouse kitchen. He had been aided by the twin brothers, who were five years his junior, and they had got through with the chores in considerably less time than usual. The three were now washing-up at the bench in a hurry. Mrs. McLane, slicing potatoes into the griddle, noted special efforts were being made, and sniffed somewhat disdainfully.

"I ain't one to put on airs to-day which have to be taken off to-morrow. I might have put on my best black skirt, but Ena'd see me in my old calico the very next time she set eyes on me, so what's the use? Better begin as you mean to go on, and cause no flurry. You boys are washin' your necks three times round to-night where once does as a usual thing and often nothin' at all. Be quick and get through anyway. I want someone to look after the supper while I go upstairs."

Ross hung up his towel, and went to the window, peering out.

"They won't be here for ten minutes," he said, brushing his hair down with his moist hands. "Dick had one or two errands to do on his way back."

"If he don't forget 'em on account o' having Ena with him, which is more'n likely. Dick ain't much of a hand at thinkin' o' more than one thing at a time, and Ena's comin' here has upset him quite a bit. I

don't know why, I'm sure, for he sees that I ain't puttin' myself out o' the way any. I ain't found time to finish straightenin' the bedroom she's to have till this minute. Ross, did you set those books o' yourn out o' the closet?"

"I did it this morning."

"Then I'll take this piece-quilt and lay over the bed. It's the last new one I made, and I shouldn't like to say how many stitches there is in it. If Ena is handy with her needle, she'll be a help with the sewin'."

Ross followed his mother through the sitting-room and up the little flight of stairs which opened directly into the north bedroom. Here Dick slept, and here also, owing to the new arrangement, a feather-bed for Jerry and Dan had been thrown on the floor in one corner. Ross looked at it doubtfully.

"They'll sleep as well there as the President does in the White House," said Mrs. McLane. "If they don't rest good they

can work a little harder durin' the day, and that'll cure 'em. Now, why don't you share this bed with Dick 'stead o' wantin' the little off-room which I've only used for a garret,"

"Because I like to be alone, and I can have my things to myself." Ross stepped into the little room as if to shield it from entry. "You let me fix it up, mother, and it'll be all right."

"I don't care, if you want it. You're neat enough, I'll say that for you always. Here you've been fixing up Ena's room, too. Ain't these your own book-shelves?"

"I'm making some more for myself." Ross looked anxiously at the wooden bedstead, the chair and little table, and the two strips of rag-carpet. "If we had a rocker up here, mother, it would be all right."

"Rocker, none! What I've got are for the sittin'-room. If Ena's a good helpful girl, she won't want to sit up here and rock.

Yesterday you was askin' me for a muslin blind for the window."

"I don't want it now. Ena can't have seen a finer view than she gets here. I've watched Pine Hill ever since I can remember. She'll see it when she wakes to-morrow morning."

"She may not have your fancies for such things." Mrs. McLane spoke a little softly, turning the candle-light full on the boy's eager face. This third son of hers was, in many ways, a puzzle, and sometimes an annoyance, but she loved him well.

"If she's like most girls she'll want to tend the house and sew, and find new ways o' doin' her hair. It's best for a woman to be that way, anyhow. It all comes in her path, and if she don't like it so much the worse for her. Just smooth the bed-quilt over there. You've found a flower or two for the vase, I declare. That's so much the better, but I've no time for such ways. Don't the smell o' them pertaters burnin' come right

to your nose? Jerry McLane is a poor enough hand at a cook-stove."

Ross leaned out of the window as his mother and the candle vanished simultaneously. The tranquil night of the Indian summer had fallen, but looking to the west, he could see a soft blur of hills against the sky. The still woods lay below them, and nearer there were open spaces, dotted by the lit windows of lonely farmhouses. The road from Creston wound between the hills and along for eight miles till it passed in front of the McLane house, from which it was separated by a lawn which did as it liked, and a semicircle of trees which the birds owned.

In spite of the fact that he was old enough to know what a sixth child dependent on the slender resources of the family would mean, Ross could not help sharing to some extent the delighted excitement of the twins over the advent of the cousin from California. There was a certain novelty in the

episode which outshone even reasons of prudence, and it seemed superfluous (at the moment) to reflect on the possible vicissitudes that Ena's coming might bring. Ross was more inclined to take his mother's attitude just now, and assume a wholesale trust over the future. Life so far had been secure in fundamentals: there had always been three meals a day, a suit for Sundays, and a variety of garments calculated for working wear. It was true that these latter were often of a somewhat trying description, fished mostly from the depths of a mysteriously bountiful attic, and rarely calculated, either in size or shape, to adorn the person called upon to close their career. Yet the McLane children were well schooled in the necessities adversity brings, and Ross had even been known to wear the prune-coloured coat of a deceased great-uncle with a sense of blessing.

In thinking of Ena there was a distinctly restful sense about the fact that the winter

was coming. After the hard work of the summer the whole community at the farm were wont to sigh with a certain relief at the first flying of the snow. It meant a still further seclusion, even from the straggling little village of Lindville, but the McLanes were a family of resource, and the pioneer spirit burned bravely. There was a certain pleasure in the fighting experiences the winter brought, which appealed to one and all. Ross squared his shoulders involuntarily as he thought of it, and he became convinced that Ena would resent her surroundings less than Dick imagined. Mrs. McLane had declared more than once that there would be the charm of novelty; and Ross sat down in sudden enthusiasm on the new patchwork quilt, half believing that this would prove true.

The grinding of buggy-wheels on the dusty road stopped any further speculation, and, straining his eyes through the nearly fallen darkness, Ross saw Dick driving in.

He rushed downstairs, encountering his mother as she emerged from the kitchen, gripping the potato-fork in one hand.

"Open the door, do," she demanded. "Jerry and Dan ha' been watchin' this half-hour, neglectin' everythin' else, and now they're fit to hide in the cellar for shyness. Dick's brought the buggy to the front porch, and there's Ena gettin' out now. My! A taller girl than I thought, and dressed quiet, but as fine as a fiddle. Let me get out to her."

Ross held the door open, the colour of doubt and diffidence mounting slowly to his face. He had never seen before the type of girl his mother drew into the room, and as her eyes met his he withdrew his glance, the greeting on his lips unspoken. Mrs. McLane laughed as she kissed her niece.

"They're shy, one and all, but we don't see strangers in these parts, Ena. Loose your coat, child, and make yourself at home right away. You've got a share in the place

now, you know. Just throw your clothes in the rocker over there, and then come to the fire. I misdoubt but what you've had a cold drive."

"Only for the last few minutes." Ena crossed to Ross as she spoke, holding out her hand. At the same moment she caught sight of Jerry and Dan, pushing one another surreptitiously forward into the room.

"What a lot of boys!" she said.

"All boys," said Mrs. McLane. "Four you've seen, though I must say you've got nothin' out of 'em, and one more to come. That's Dale, and he works out over to Uncle Ed's farm, three miles or more from here. He'll be here to-night to spend over Sunday with us, and that's all we see of him just now. It's a real grist o' boys for you, Ena, and only one anywhere near your own age. You and Ross ought to get along together when he's got over feelin' you're somethin' right out o' the common. Now all o' you come and set right down to supper."

Ross pulled his chair from under the table, but at the same moment a sudden distaste for supper seized him. Nobody was looking, and he opened the back-door softly, and slipped out unnoticed. Dick was coming across the yard from the barn, and Ross saw him enter the kitchen and take his accustomed place at the table. Then Mrs. McLane noticed the absent one, and came to the door shouting impatiently; but Ross stayed silently in the wood-shed, and the call was not repeated.

How long he sat there he did not know, but the lights were all out in the farmhouse when at last he stepped quietly across the yard. In the meantime he had thought himself into a state of comparative tranquillity. The feeling of having been taken unawares had passed, and he braced himself with the belief that, when the morning came, he would be able to meet the wonderful cousin with almost as much nonchalance as Mrs. McLane.

CHAPTER II

"WHEN shall I see Aunt Loosher?" Ena had been at the farm three days now, and the fatigue of the long journey and the first dreadful sensation of homesickness were things of the past. To-day was Tuesday, and it seemed a long, long while back to the previous Saturday evening of her arrival. Since then she had explored every nook and cranny round the farm, and made friends with all the members of the curious, happy-go-lucky family into whose midst she had so suddenly been cast. There was too much work going on for anyone to pay particular attention to her, but this was just as well, for Ena did best when cast on her own resources, and her natural courage and self-reliance had already asserted itself. Of all the new cousins, it was to Ross she turned instinctively for comrade-

ship. He had unfolded gradually from his first shyness, partly, perhaps, because Ena displayed no such feeling towards him. The two had seen a good deal of each other in the past three days, but their first real conversation was taking place now, on the woodpile, while Ena awaited Mrs. McLane's summons to "go over" her trunks—a mysterious task which had been put off from hour to hour and day to day, since her arrival.

"When shall I see Aunt Loosher?" Ena persisted, watching Ross pile the wood in order. "Dale told me on Sunday that I shouldn't be a part of the neighbourhood until Aunt Loosher had seen me. Who is she?"

"She's the eldest of all ma's family—the one that's lame in the knees, you know. It makes her so she can't always get around when she wants to, and then she's mad. Didn't you hear Dale say she wanted to come over with him Sunday?"

"Was she too sick?"

"Just her knees. She's rickety. Ma's promised to let you go over one day this week, and then you'll see her, and Uncle Ed. Jerry's scared lest she wants you to stay with her."

"To stay with her?" Ena sat down suddenly on the logs, feeling overcome by the proposition. "Haven't they any children of their own?"

"No."

"Is that why Dale stays there?" Ena put her chin in her hands. The inquisitive side of her nature had been called to the front now.

"Dale stays to help. Aunt Loosher wouldn't have him round for the fun of it." Ross laughed as he swung his axe.

"Why does Jerry think I may stay over there too?"

"Just an idea he's got—perhaps he heard Dale say something. I guess Dale teased

him," Ross concluded, noticing Ena's serious face.

"Is that all? I thought you really meant it." Ena rose, drawing a long breath. "I've been for a year past with an aunt and uncle who hadn't any children, and I didn't like it. They didn't care for it either." Ena added simply, "and so I stayed at school most of the time."

Ross looked at her enviously. "The district school over the hill there won't be any good to you," he said, pointing west. "You'd have to go to Creston for the schooling that you want."

"Do you?"

"Not yet." A faint colour stole into the boy's cheeks, and he wielded the axe with redoubled vigour, as if he guessed that in devoted labour only lay the chance to attain his desire—which, indeed, was true! Ena moved a step nearer. She was sure by now that she liked Ross the best of all the cousins.

"I'll go to the district school with you

this winter if Aunt June will let me. We can study together in the evening, and perhaps I can help——"

Just then Mrs. McLane's head appeared at the bedroom window as she shouted a quick summons. Ena left her sentence unfinished but understood, and hurried upstairs. Mrs. McLane was already in the doorway of the bedroom, casting a somewhat withering glance round at the extreme neatness within.

"You take after your ma in being finicky, Ena. She just spent her time in puttin' crooked chairs straight and tackin' down carpet for someone to kick up again. I misdoubt but what she'd ha' lived longer if she'd ha' been more easy-backed in the way o' takin' things. But she was a woman who never saw where she was at till she got there, and so she was always havin' a time doin' what she hadn't expected to. Now which trunk do you want me to go over first?"

Ena, unconscious of having made any re-

quest in the matter at all, pulled out the smaller trunk.

"I put just my dresses in here, and nothing else," she remarked. Mrs. McLane sniffed.

"Two trunks for a girl o' thirteen is quite a bit o' baggage. You ain't stinted none in clothes, that's sure. How many new things did your Uncle Hugo and your aunt buy for you when they knew you was comin' here?"

"Aunt made me those linen dresses—those you're taking out now."

Scorn seemed to be dripping from Mrs. McLane's fingers. She held one of the dresses aloft.

"All decked out with embroidery, as if you'd been comin' to sit in a front parlour for the rest o' your life. I can tell by her notion o' fixin' clothes that she and I wouldn't get on for a minute. Why didn't she get you some good calico?"

"I suppose she didn't think of it."

"Likely she didn't. It's easy to see she's one o' those women who live sorter lace-edged lives, drinkin' tea in high-heeled slippers, and embroiderin' little mats. It clear tuckers me out to have anythin' to do with 'em, and I always want to set 'em scourin' milk-pails. Your Aunt Loosher had a sort o' spell that way when she was a young woman, but marryin' a farmer took all the nonsense out o' her, and she was soon feedin' hogs as good as anybody."

"Is Aunt Loosher your only sister?"

"No, there's another one, but she lives a matter o' fifty miles from here, and I ain't seen her in this ten years. She took to her bed to reform her husband."

"Was he wicked?"

"Drink," said Mrs. McLane tersely. "It's funny that Rachel was always so agen drink, and that's the very thing she married. Seems as if the thing we run away from runs after us. I guess Jeremiah let up some on his ways when he saw how things was goin',

but by that time Rachel was too comfortable to quit, and there she lays till this day. Last I heer'd o' her she had took to hatchin' eggs."

"Hatchin eggs?" Ena sat up incredulously, with quivering lips. "Are you serious, Aunt June?"

Mrs. McLane sniffed disapproval.

"I don't see why I ain't, nor what there is to laugh at neither. The woman lays there continual, and she may as well make some use o' herself. It's the only sensible thing I've heer'd about her in a long while. Now you've got a real mess o' muslin dresses here, Ena, and you'll never get through with 'em by just wearin' 'em Sundays."

"I wear them every day in the hot weather." Ena came back somewhat wonderingly from thoughts of Aunt Rachel.

"Did them folks in Californy think you'd keep at the flimsy-limsy style o' life down here; don't they know nothin' about farm ways?"

"I don't think so," Ena confessed, looking at her wardrobe, which, until now, had befitted her mode of life. "City life is different. Uncle Hugo said it would be much better for me to be brought up in the country."

Mrs. McLane looked at the girl's face and saw complete innocence there.

"Did your Uncle Hugo have a pleasant way with him?" she inquired disdainfully. Ena nodded.

"I thought so. Sorter smiled when he said that, and maybe patted your head. I'm glad you've come to a place where nobody'll pat your head, but where what you find sorter feels your own. Guess you've got that kind o' feelin' in your blood a'ready, ain't you?"

"A little bit, Aunt June."

"June! For the land's sake, don't call me that soft name, child. Let it be Ju, just as everybody else does. The folks must ha' been crazy when they called me June."

"But it's pretty."

"Nothin's pretty that ain't got sense to it, and a tormentin' name like that makes you feel kind o' silly-like, as if you'd been writ about in a dime novel. Your mother —she was just my sister, you know, and I never saw her till I was past eleven—used to laugh about the names in our fam'ly, and she always called Loosher 'Lucheer'—same as it should be, she said. Loosher was quite set up over it for a bit, but then she got kind of scared about the spellin', and last of all she went back to the good-enough way we'd always had. Your mother kept her own notion over it, though—she had just enough cussedness in her to make her real amusin' and sorter independent, and I can see you're some the same. Seems queer I never saw her after she married and went out to Californy. It's a long way, though, and I guess your pa's folks is diff'rent—sorter gingery about mixin' with milk when once they'd riz to be cream. No disrespect to 'em," Mrs.

McLane added hurriedly, seeing she had introduced a new idea into Ena's mind. "There's lots that way, and it seems sorter human nature for some people to want to be in the boss-seat, even if it only brings 'em rotten eggs. Well, I've come to the bottom o' this trunk, and ain't found nothin' reasonable in the way o' wear in it. There's nothin' highfalutin, but everythin's made in a way which shows me that your aunt thinks more o' Parishun fashions than she does o' salvation. I'm not sure what the folks'll think when you go to Sabbath-school. Likely they'll feel I'd ought to ha' set you up in somethin' diff'rent; but it goes mortal agen the grain for me to waste anythin', though I ain't got no miserly blood in me same as Loosher."

"I'll wear these out, and get calico afterwards," suggested Ena, breathing a sigh of relief as she saw Mrs. McLane's fingers going more lightly over the second trunk. "How will that do, Aunt June?"

"I guess that'll be right. If I'd had girls you could ha' shared up with 'em some, but there ain't a girl in the hull family. Loosher's nary chick nor child, and since she's gone some lame in the knees, I guess she feels the want o' one to trip around a bit for her. She's such pernickety ways that no hired girl'll stay more'n a week or two. If Dale warn't soft and easy-goin', he couldn't take a bit o' comfort over there, but he's just one o' the sort that anywheres is home to him. He's like his father, who you'll not see till spring, seein' as he's gone in the woods this winter. I'm kind o' sorry he left home early this year, but he's been stayin' a couple o' weeks with a sick brother up North, and from there he'll go on to the loggin' camp. I writ him a letter yest'day sayin' you was here, and how he'd have somethin' fresh to come home to in the spring."

"Didn't he know I was coming?" Ena looked a little disconcerted, some habits of

the McLane family being as yet unfamiliar to her.

"Time enough for him to know now, when we've sure-enough got you here." Mrs. McLane struggled up from the floor. "Rob McLane sorter fits into my doin's, quiet like, and there's a good bit o' peaceableness about him. He's a deal easier to do with than Dick, as you'll see later on when you get the hang o' the family. I ain't sorter shook down to the feelin' o' you yet, though you don't act strange a particle, and I'm glad of it. That used to be your mother's way. She'd just set down with anybody, and act as if she'd known 'em a hundred years. It's a good thing those Californy folks ain't took the naturalness out o' you. I'll bet your aunt is all starch and frills?"

Ena looked puzzled.

"No harm meant to her, o' course," said Mrs. McLane. "I can just fancy she and me wouldn't get on, that's all. Folks has to have diff'rent ways, else we should all

die o' the monotony of each other, and there'd be no chance to pick at one another, nor nothin'. It'd be a pretty dull world for some folks, I tell you. Now, your aunt, maybe, is a good woman in her way, but she ain't got the feelin' that we're all brothers and sisters in this world, and oughter give the helpin' hand to one another, and never mind if it's a crust less for yourself. Religion don't p'int that way to her, and she ain't got it natural. I take it she ain't Methody?"

Ena shook her head.

"I thought not. Likely she belongs to a church where you have to have silk linin's to your skirt afore you can attend. The way some folks worship is clear insultin' to the Lord. Old Marthy Swiggs down the road here ain't had no proper use for prayer since she had a bit o' money left her, and could come to meetin' with flowers and folde-rols in her bonnet. It's wonderful how some folks is willin' to lose their chance o'

salvation for a bit o' vanity. I'm hopin' your clothes don't make you feel that way, Ena."

Ena shook her head decisively, and Mrs. McLane turned away as if her chief doubt had been set at rest.

"Just as soon as they get to the wearin' out p'int you can hand 'em over to me for my piece-quilts. I've made one for every child I've got, and I'll likely set about one for you. Now I'm going down to wash the dishes, seein' they've been settin' around hours. If Loosher happened in, which thank the Lord she ain't likely to, she'd sorter sniff with pleasure at catchin' that pan o' dishes. I know the expression of her face so well I can tell it by lookin' at the back of her head."

Mrs. McLane rattled downstairs, but Ena remained in the bedroom, looking absently at the pretty clothes strewn around her trunk. The fact of their comparative uselessness had been forced upon her by Mrs.

McLane's pungent criticisms. Ena stirred uneasily at the remembrance, and could think of no way out of the situation. Things would have to be adapted, not changed. She folded away the clothes with a thoughtful face, listening first to Mrs. McLane's ceaseless admonishings in the kitchen below, and then to Ross nailing up rough deal bookshelves in the little garret he had claimed for his own. The last sound was inspirational, and by-and-by she stole in to the boy. He took no notice of her, and it was not until he had finished that she went up to him. Quite silently they stood together, viewing his work—scantily filled shelves which were to be his avenue to heights he meant to attain.

In a flash Ena saw the way of the boy's dreams opened to her, and her hand stole up to his shoulder. He stood heavily, a dull flush mounting to his cheek, but he understood; and thus, without a word, or further sign, the compact of their friendship was sealed for good.

CHAPTER III

UNCLE ED'S farm (it was usually called Aunt Loosher's) lay some three miles from the McLane house, and was still further isolated from town and neighbours. The house faced a wooded ravine of great beauty, through which the river ran, and all around the earth billowed and undulated until it seemed as if the farm were shut all by itself into the little valley.

Here Lucia van Orme and her husband had lived and worked since they were respectively twenty and twenty-one. No children had ever been born to them, and, contrary to Mrs. McLane's advice, they had never adopted any. Uncle Ed had once sided with his sister-in-law in abusing the empty door-yard, and even suggested a visit to an orphanage; but after the departure of Mrs. McLane on that occasion Aunt Loosher had "opened up her mind" to him,

and for ever afterwards he had maintained a discreet silence when the subject was mentioned. Mrs. McLane, who never gave up the hope of reforming those in error, and dearly loved a conversion of any sort, did not scruple to insist on her views, even though she found they met with disfavour. Uncle Ed saw this in time, and used to go out to the barn when the subject came up.

Lucia van Orme was now a woman of fifty, unusually tall and gaunt, with a thin sharp face that seemed to match her figure. A life of strenuous work had brought on prematurely the infirmities that belong to age, and for the last three years she had complained daily at the breakfast-table concerning the crippled state of her knees. Uncle Ed had listened and commented as regularly as he had sugared his oatmeal, and passed his opinion on the weather; but he never had any suggestions to make. All that sort of thing had to come from Aunt Loosher.

It was the Tuesday following Ena's arrival that a sort of explosion took place at the Van Orme breakfast-table. Aunt Loosher sat nearer the stove than usual, the little black shawl she wore winter and summer round her shoulders, an extra one wrapped round her knees. She had announced herself lamer than ever on this particular morning.

"And likely to keep so, with the winter comin' on," she complained to Uncle Ed, as Dale finished his breakfast and went out. "You don't know nothin' about what I suffer with these knees o' mine; no one don't. Ju thinks she has a time with her feet, but she ain't got the first idea what a tormentin' time I have with my limbs. There'll have to be somethin' done in the way o' helpin' me, or else I shall give out twenty years afore my time."

"Anythin' I can do?"

"You can't do nothin'." Aunt Loosher looked at her husband witheringly. "Your

work lays outside, and I'm talking about the inside—the cookin', and cleanin', and things that give me so many steps. If I could have a rest-up this winter I'd be fresh for the spring, yet I hate to pay out the money a hired girl wants, and what's more, I won't. I ain't struggled all my life to fill somebody else's pockets, so that's all there is to it. What I've been thinkin' about will help Ju. She don't deserve it with her foolishness, but I ain't one to look over a Christian act when I see it right in my path. I'll take that girl she's brought over from Californy off her hands."

The announcement was made with due impressiveness. Aunt Loosher folded her hands and waited for words of praise, but Uncle Ed, taken completely unawares, did not notice what was expected of him. The only thing that appealed to him was the fact that his wife seemed to have yielded to her sister's coaxing at last, and he dimly wondered if the state of Aunt Loosher's

knees had begun to affect her head.

"I say I'll take the girl off Ju's hands," continued Aunt Loosher with quiet emphasis, "and then she can't never say but what I give her a lift up once at least. It ain't the lesson that ought to be taught her for doin' the thing. Ju's always been the one to take a step for'ard and two back'ard, in the way o' speakin', but this time I ain't goin' to call her down so pertickler for it. Ena can come here to work, and we shall be savin' a hired girl's wages." There was another pause. Uncle Ed laced his shoes, feeling bewilderment in his very finger-tips. "We shall be savin' and gettin' at the same time," continued Aunt Loosher, "and the sooner she's here the better. Ju's sendin' her and Ross over this mornin', seein' as I couldn't get there Sunday, and so I'll have a chance to look her over and sorter pick my words out ready. What d'you say?"

The last words were such a concession that

Uncle Ed reddened a little as he put on his out-door coat.

"I'd like to have the girl here," he answered. "You do the fixin' up of it, Loosher," he added guardedly, "and then we can see about findin' out how to make her sorter happy and contented here. What'll Dale say?"

"Dale ain't nothin' to do with it, save feelin' his ma's riddanced of an extry load she couldn't very well bear. It crossed my head that havin' the boy and girl together might make 'em inclined for a bit o' gossip and laziness, but I think I can sit on that all right. Now you be in at twelve to the minute. I've got a busy forenoon, and no time to hang round waitin' for dinner so much as a second."

All that morning Aunt Loosher worked with an air of subdued triumph, as one sees in secret the solving of a riddle. Towards eleven o'clock she went into the front parlour and pulled up the shades—a strictly

unusual proceeding, the sunlight being rigidly excluded on account of the rag carpet. The ravine road came into view now, and Aunt Loosher peered out narrowly, but without result.

"Likely they're takin' the walk easy, but Ross'll surely have sense to be on time for dinner, and me cookin' chicken too! I'll warrant the girl'll feel it's goin' to be a good change for her. This here parlour puts Ju's all to shame. She ain't got never a crayon o' the fam'ly on her walls, and I've got a hull row. Folks ought to have one good room, even if they don't never use it. This carpet ain't no more faded than the day I put it down, thanks to the care I've took of it. Lordy!"

Aunt Loosher was rarely taken off her guard, but now she stood as if rooted to the middle of the rag carpet, her eyes fixed on the boy and girl who had approached unseen, and were nearing the yard-gate.

"For the land's sake!" Aunt Loosher put

her hands on her hips and went nearer the window, the better to examine Ena's blue muslin figure and flying curls. Such a dainty apparition had not been seen on the ravine road since the frame house was built, and Aunt Loosher's face soured into a hundred wrinkles as she watched. "My land o' liberty! Have I been takin' comfort at the thought o' havin' such a child as that around, scrubbin' floors and doin' for me? It's just like Ju's meanness to sit plank down on any o' my schemes, whether she knows 'em or not, and I'll wager she dressed the child up in her good clothes just to be tormentin' to me. My! but if I can get a word with Ed van Orme afore dinner, I'll warn him not to let a word out o' his head o' what I said this mornin'. Else I'm skeered he'll be just rattle-brained enough to do it, and I'll have a time explainin' my knees are some better when they ain't."

* * * * *

Even an hour later, when the whole family

were seated at dinner and the conversation had grown less restrained, Aunt Loosher had not recovered her equanimity. Her thin figure, in the grey calico wrapper, looked uncompromising, and gave off an atmosphere of being provoked, which was very unsatisfying. Ena tried to win smiles in vain, and at last turned her attention to Uncle Ed.

The latter had been duly caught on the back porch when coming in to dinner and hurriedly instructed to maintain silence.

"She's just a bit o' blue muslin," Aunt Loosher had whispered tragically, "and no more good for a kitchen than an eagle for a back-yard. Ju's been clean imposed on, and I'm goin' over to tell her so."

But, in spite of all, Uncle Ed grew wistful at the dinner-table, when he realized that his hope of the morning was already broken; and when, after the meal was over, Ena helped to clear off the table and went up quite naturally to wipe the dishes, he won-

dered if Loosher would not see the child was adaptable, and ready to face her change of circumstances in a common-sense way.

But Aunt Loosher, washing the dishes, had no such idea at all. When the work was done up, and the grey calico wrapper changed for a brown one of similar material and structure, she went into the parlour, where Ross, who knew his manners, was showing Ena the family album.

"We don't use the front parlour for common." Aunt Loosher straightened a crocheted "tidy" and lowered the shades a trifle. "I just pulled these up to watch you two come down the ravine road, and some way my eyes wasn't good or you stole a march on me. P'raps you thought I greeted you surprised-like, Ena. You seemed to come on me all of a sudden, and I ain't one to gather my wits easy, Then my knees bother me all the time, and some days my stomach don't behave good. If I was a bit fleshier I should feel better, but

I'm around all the time, and can't take things as easy-goin' as Ju does. That tintype you're lookin' at is a picture o' me when I was real young, and I reckon I ain't changed as much as you might think."

"Ma says you keep your figure better than most of the family," said Ross obligingly.

"I ain't never heer'd you ma say so," said Aunt Loosher, more pleasantly than she had yet spoken, "but I know it's so. I was always counted pretty smart-lookin' when I was young, and when I have on my good dress it makes a diff'rence to me you wouldn't think for. I wish I could wear it more, but there ain't any chances, 'cept with a funeral, or somethin' o' that sort. I had it made nine years ago last fall, when old man Sorensen died lingerin' with cancer, and it's real becomin'. You'll be over to see me now and again, Ena, and some day I'll get it out and show you. When I was a young girl no one round these parts had

smarter fixin's 'n me—I warn't all give up to pork and calico like I am now."

Ena's blue eyes were interested, but she said nothing, and Aunt Loosher put a mental mark to her credit that she was a polite listener, and not a talkative child.

"When you've got your own home, and workin' a farm, you ain't got time to think o' makin' yourself smart, and I've always been savin', too, never runnin' no risk o' havin' to be supported by someone else some day. I ain't had no young ones o' my own, but I reckon I could give good advice to anybody else as wanted it." Aunt Loosher looked from the boy to the girl as if expecting an immediate demand. "Dale here says he's learnt quite a few things by notin' my ways o' doin', and I'm real glad he has. I told Ju that, but she snapped me up uncommon quick. Ross, you can go down cellar and fetch up some apples—some o' them Wealthies you'll find down there, for they rot the quickest. And if you're so

minded you can take a small basketful home to your ma, for she ain't a tree o' that sort on the place, though I begged her to plant a couple the year Dick was born. I do believe if anyone but me had persuaded Ju she'd ha' done it, but no, sir! she warn't goin' to have me know best!" and Aunt Loosher laughed softly at some recollection she did not reveal.

When the apples were eaten, a tour of the house followed, from the cellar up. This took some time, for most of the household treasures were pointed out, and the explanation of their origin given at length. Ross, to whom nothing was new, followed a little impatiently, a sense of loyalty to Ena detaining him. To leave her alone with Aunt Loosher's tongue at full tide seemed an injustice. Already she looked a little bewildered.

A diversion came when they reached the garret, and Aunt Loosher suddenly darted to the window. "I declare to goodness

there's another o' them tormentin' pedlars just drove in the back-yard. I never seem to get up here and go to nosin' round a little and enjoyin' myself but what one o' them fellers comes along. Seems like they know where I am and want to shout 'rags' at me. If it was Ju she'd have 'em dump their stuff so's she could see what was good for carpet-rags, but that ain't my way. Guess I'll have to go clear down and send him off; he wouldn't march so quick for no one else."

The garret door shut, but only for a few moments. Aunt Loosher reappeared, gasping a little for breath. "I'm just comin' up to show Ena my carpet-rags. I got nine balls sewed since you were here last, Ross, and two of 'em coloured. You can tell your ma that. Well, it looks like some steady rain afore night, and maybe you two had best start for home in good time, though you've only got a matter o' three mile to walk. You tell your ma we're goin' to hitch up and come over Sunday if so be my

knees'll let me. I got lots to talk to her about"—there was a quick glance at Ena, which only Ross saw—"and, 'sides that, I guess she'd best plan up for sure about that quiltin'-bee she talks o' havin', if she wants to get her new comforters ready afore snow flies. I'm glad you brought a coat with you against evenin', Ena; that blue dress's turrible frail for this sort o' weather, Indian summer bein' most gone. It ain't all sun where you live now"; and as the children stepped off the porch Aunt Loosher shook her head in a way calculated to bring forebodings to the sternest heart. She truly felt that so much buoyancy, when combined with blue muslin, ought to receive a sobering suggestion for the last.

Aunt Loosher was frying potatoes in the kitchen when Uncle Ed came in that night, and she saw him give a quick glance round as he hung up his coat, and she heard him sigh. The sound exasperated her.

"Maybe you thought that fly-away child'd

come dancin' out to meet you, but no such thing ain't goin' to happen. It takes Ju to hamper herself with such as that. It seems too bad, just the same, that I should be kep' standin' round on my feet when only this mornin' there seemed the chance o' help comin'."

"Dale and me thought Ena seemed real handy," ventured Uncle Ed.

"Handy nothin'. Children that's been dressed up like that always are just fit to sit round on parlour chairs and be waited on. I can see you're sorter pinin' to fix me up with fresh work, but I've got my head stuck on steady, 'spite o' you and Ju. You can try your best, but it won't work."

Uncle Ed did not try to make it any more. He went to bed early; but Aunt Loosher sat up late, planning a whole series of caustic remarks which she intended to deliver to Mrs. McLane the very next time she happened to see her.

CHAPTER IV

A WEEK later the first touch of cold weather came, and Mrs. McLane, who possessed a special faculty for leaving things at loose ends, and an unreasoning faith in the last minute, began to think hurriedly of the quilting-bee she had mentioned on several occasions.

Aunt Loosher had not arrived on the Sunday, having sent word by Dale that her knees were not equal to it. Dale had delivered the message phlegmatically, and Mrs. McLane had sniffed as she washed her milk-pans.

"I guess she could come if she wanted to, but she thinks more o' posin' as a sorter invalid than anythin' else. It was always Loosher's way to try to draw attention to herself. Now if she had my feet she might have some call to complain. What d'you

think of Loosher's ailments yourself, Dale?"

But Dale had no opinion to give, and Mrs. McLane began to think she had a stupid one in the family.

"Have the bee, and don't trouble to send word to Aunt Loosher," Dick advised, when the subject came up at the dinner-table. "If she's sick she can't come, and you say you want the work done pretty badly."

"I do," Mrs. McLane admitted.

"You'll get on just as quick without her." Dick kept all the intelligible part of his face in his coffee-cup as he spoke. "Now you take my advice for once, ma."

"I believe I will," conceded Mrs. McLane, a light in her eye which her children did not entirely misunderstand.

This being arranged upon, it was a distinct surprise, on the afternoon set for the bee, to see Aunt Loosher drive into the yard. The remains of an early dinner were being cleared away in the kitchen when the twins

rushed to the back steps and shouted the news.

"Not only come, but the first here," soliloquised Mrs. McLane, a little ungraciously. Then she went to the door just as the buggy drew up in front of it.

"Thought you was fairly sick abed with them knees o' yourn, Loosher. My! you've give me a surprise."

Aunt Loosher was descending from the buggy with a certain air of infirmity.

"George Sorensen was by yest'day, and he told me you'd planned the quiltin' for this afternoon, and I just told Ed I was comin', no matter how I felt," Aunt Loosher responded, giving the reins to the twins. "It seemed clear provokin' that I shouldn't get over to help you."

"You're the first to get here." Mrs. McLane pushed a chair nearer the stove, and looked into the coffee-pot. "Set right down by the stove and git warm. Seems as if we've got a real cold spell after the nice

weather we've had. So you're some better?"

"A little," Aunt Loosher acknowledged, stirring the cup of coffee placed at the back of the stove. "My! this coffee tastes real good, Ju. You always had a sort o' knack with coffee."

Mrs. McLane looked mollified. Aunt Loosher peered round.

"Where's Ena?"

"You won't see nothin' o' her for a while. She's to school with Ross. I ought to ha' made the twins go, too, but Jerry woke cryin' with the toothache this mornin', and Dan won't never go if Jerry ain't along. Them two young ones stick together all the time, and they're in all the mischief they can find."

"To school with Ross!" Aunt Loosher heard only the first part of the sentence. "Did she come out here to get her education, Ju?"

"Guess she's got it a'ready—more'n she'll

find at the district school—but she and Ross has took wonderful to each other, and he wants her along. Ross is gettin' real smart with his books, and she helps him nights."

"Seein' you've took her when you hadn't ought I'd make some use o' her." Aunt Loosher drew the little black shawl closer round her shoulders and fingered it nervously. A very provoking idea had occurred to her only that morning, and she was to know no peace until her doubts were settled.

"I'd make some use o' her," she repeated with asperity. "What's your notion about the girl, Ju?"

"She's real nice spoken, and wants to be helpful all she can. I ain't never had no girl round the place, and it seems kind o' queer, but——" Here Mrs. McLane stopped to throw out a pan of dish-water, and Aunt Loosher strained forward, her eyes narrowed to slits of suspicion.

"If you've brought her out here with any

idea o' my adoptin' her—if you done it a-purpose, Ju——"

"I ain't been havin' no such notion." Mrs. McLane rattled the stove lids threateningly. "Don't you get any thinner than you are a'ready, worryin' over that, for you can't afford to lose any flesh. I know you're real mad to think she's here, but it's been my motto always to give the helpin' hand to whatever come along needin' it, and I ain't goin' to depart from my ways for nobody's croakin's. Now we've got it right out in the beginnin', Loosher, and if you've rested up we can go in the sittin'-room and begin."

There was such an air of robust defiance about Mrs. McLane that Aunt Loosher swallowed an answer and meekly followed her sister to the scene of activity, feeling it best to defer some of her intended remarks.

"There's Marthy Swiggs comin' now," said Mrs. McLane, taking observations at the window. "And she's brought Mandy Perkins along, same as I asked. Prue ain't

with 'em, and I'll bet she's a-bed with her insides again. Seems as if no one don't understand what's the matter with Prue. She's been doctorin' for years, and took every patent medicine she ever seen advertised, and yet she don't get no better."

"Ed ain't no great believer in patent medicines," remarked Aunt Loosher.

"But I am," said Mrs. McLane firmly. "The men who makes 'em knows the insides up and down. There's stuff put up for everythin' that ails you, and if you don't know rightly what it is, you best keep tryin' the different dopes, and you're bound to hit it in time. Prue has got forty-'leven bottles on her pantry shelf, but she ain't been lucky in strikin' the right kind yet. She warn't in very good spirits when I last seen her, but I told her to cheer up and keep right on. It ain't no good givin' in now, when she's been at it as long as four years——" and Mrs. McLane hurried out to meet her guests.

Mandy Perkins was considered the most

expert quilter in the neighbourhood, and this may have accounted for her slight air of superiority. Misfortune had visited her in another way, however, since for something like ten years she had been unable to speak above a whisper. Nobody quite knew why, though disagreeable people had been heard to suggest that the well-known garrulity of her youth had something to do with it. The local doctors had failed to help her, and Mandy's horror of steam-cars prevented her going farther afield for information. So the whisper remained.

Nobody ever felt ill at ease in the McLane house, and before two minutes had passed wraps were off and work begun. Marthy Swiggs had come in her bonnet with the plum-coloured rose in it, and this she laid in a conspicuous position on the side-table. Mrs. McLane promptly covered it with a *Farmer's Journal.*

"If I don't do that the rest of us'll get to envyin' you, Marthy," she explained, the

touch of scorn in her voice that her neighbours knew and feared. "You must ha' had more money left you than the rest of us guessed at, for I ain't never seen a shawl over your head since your Uncle Jake died."

"I've wanted to wear hats ever since I were ten years old," said Marthy contentedly, "and I've got 'em now. Seems like I can't think enough o' Uncle Jake. You know he left a hundred dollars for his tombstone, but I added fifty more and now he's got a beauty."

"Seems I'd use money for somethin' else than hats and tombstones," said Mrs. McLane. "It's my way to look at what can be done without in the manner o' showin' off. The hat I wear to meetin' I've had since six year ago last Easter, and I wear it back, front, or sides, accordin' to what fashion is, and no one's ever been the better nor worse for it. I'd feel plumb uncomfortable in anythin' else now, so its bein' shabby don't worry me none. My! you're quicker'n ever

with your fingers, Mandy. I guess you've been quiltin' for yourself some lately."

"Just a bit," Mandy whispered hurriedly. Her whispers were always very rapid, as if she feared her remarks would be prematurely drowned by the louder voices of her companions. "Prue and I've got to be busy sewin' all winter."

"Prue ain't here," suggested Mrs. McLane.

"It's one o' her bad days. She took on a good bit about not bein' able to come, but she's gettin' used to them sick spells. It makes it harder for me. Two women workin' the farm and just one hired man ain't none too much. I hold it ain't no good killin' yourself, but it's hard to tell where to stop when things has got to be done."

"You never was one to look on the cheerful side," said Mrs. McLane. "Even though you and Prue ain't married, you've got a good livin' with your farm, and you two can be as independent as you please. I

wonder you ain't never adopted a child."

Aunt Loosher recognised the thrust.

"Mandy maybe don't lean that way," she said. "When she's cleaned up now, she's cleaned up, but with a young one round her heels she would be doin' all the time, and no gettin' tidy to keep so."

"That don't never bother me none," observed Mrs. McLane complacently, glancing round the untidy room. "I ain't never been one to finnick. What I can't get done one day goes over to the next, and it don't hinder my sleep any. Ena's took to tidyin' up quite a bit, but I guess she'll soon find out it don't pay. Anybody that's got twin boys knows they make an everlastin' muss."

Mrs. McLane expected the allusion to Ena would bring a storm of questions, and she was not mistaken. A round of preliminary coughs followed, and then a succession of queries began, all delicately put, for everyone present knew the temperament of

the hostess. But no amount of insinuation conquered Mrs. McLane. She knew her stronghold was silence, and she maintained it. When everyone had asked something, she looked across the room with a provoking smile. "Guess Loosher was talkin' some to you, Mandy!"

"Loosher's right, and I ain't never thought o' young ones," whispered Mandy, obeying the suggestion nervously. "Prue couldn't stand it, anyway, with her insides gettin' worse steady. We ain't all like you, Ju."

"Thank the Lord I was made easy-going," agreed Mrs. McLane. "I can just see the thing that the day brings and nothin' else. I ain't like old man Davidson that used to live over by Pine Hill, savin' and scratchin' year in and year out, always seein' to-morrow afore he seen to-day, and then dyin' to-day 'stead o' to-morrow same as he'd planned for. Terrible provokin', it must ha' been. I heard from more than one that he'd

just warmed up to have a real good time and go to see his daughter Lucindy, who he hadn't set eyes on in nine year."

"I guess it was right," agreed Marthy Swiggs. "Lucindy come to the funeral, and she said he'd boughten a store suit to go in, and been all winter makin' a new-fangled kind o' boat—a kinoo, I think she said—so's he could make the journey by water."

"I ain't got no use for a kinoo," said Mrs. McLane. "They're liable to turn over any minute, and be your hat instead o' your seat."

"We surely get lessons from other folks' ways," Marthy went on, "and it do seem sometimes that it ain't no great way for us to set so much store by what's round us. I mind when Uncle Jake's second wife died, she was plumb tormented at the thought o' havin' to leave her carpet-rags behind. She just tossed and tossed, thinkin' about it, and when she was dead and in her coffin I just

tucked a ball of 'em under her skirt to sorter comfort her."

"I'll put your bonnets alongside you, Marthy," laughed Mrs. McLane.

"You don't need to, I'll die easy 'cause I've had 'em," retorted Marthy.

The work went on apace, though conversation flew faster. Ena came in by-and-by, looking round with intelligent but somewhat wondering eyes. Aunt Loosher fidgeted angrily at sight of her, but lingered, loath to leave the scene of so much animation. Even the sight of Dick's face as he came in at intervals to fill the wood-stove did not discourage her flow of language.

"I meant to go early, but I guess I'll stay to supper after all, seein' as it's so near time," she remarked, as Mrs. McLane went into the kitchen. "It does a body good to have a change sometimes."

"I like this house 'cause there's always plenty doin' in it," whispered Mandy. "You can come in any time, and take your

luck, and no one's going to bother about you. I sorter envy Ju her disposition."

Aunt Loosher looked disapproval.

"Ju ain't got no comp'ny ways," she said, in lowered tones. "She never had—always despised 'em and used to rate me good and plenty when we was girls if I ever wanted to show folks as far as the front-room. I hold with bein' societyfied once in awhile, to show you've had a bringin' up."

"We've all got our ways," said Marthy Swiggs soothingly, standing a little way off to view the quilt with admiration. "My! that fried pork smells good, and Ju always fixes a nice gravy."

"I'm going to give you some o' my pickled crab-apples," said Mrs. McLane, from the pantry. "The boys say they ain't never tasted nothin' nicer. Dale fairly over-did hisself when he was here Sunday. I'll give you the recipe, if you like, Loosher."

"I got a fine recipe a'ready," said Aunt

Loosher, a little huffed. "Next time any o' you folks is over to my place you can try 'em. Ed won't have 'em put up no other way."

"Maybe you ain't never tried," suggested Mrs. McLane annoyingly. "Supper's ready, I guess, and you folks had best quit work. We've done a good afternoon's work—more finished than I thought for. You do well to laugh, Dick—you that can't hold a needle straight in your fingers. Maybe you think I don't know what you're grinnin' for. Loosher, you set with your back to the stove. I just put a fresh stick o' wood in to get it het up well. You ask the blessin', Ross—and give Ena some o' that gravy."

It was a cheerful meal, and the kitchen seemed all the cosier because the wind blew fiercely outside, sweeping down from the ridge right on to the little farmhouse.

Ena looked at the circle of faces gathered round the table with frank curiosity, feeling

friends with one and all in spite of the fact that they were strange types and unfamiliar. There was something in their conversation, too, simple as it was, which drew her attention. They did not talk as the aunt in California talked, but there was something in the way they spoke of things which showed the ability to grapple with daily life bravely, and the courage to smile under adverse circumstances. Their work-worn hands and shrewd seamed faces told a tale even to one as young and inexperienced as Ena; though she did not yet know that these were some of the wonderful women who had tramped forth loyally with their husbands in days gone by to fight the wilderness, northward and westward, for the living they had got.

These were things which she was to know afterward, but meantime Ena felt a respect creeping into her heart which caused her fingers to tremble a little as she passed the cake twice to Mandy. She knew there was something in this new element of life she had

entered which was going to attract her.

"Ena's sorter scared with so much talk goin' on," said Mrs. McLane, who noticed an unusual gravity in her niece, and misconstrued it. "She'll get used to it in time, anyway. Mandy, I want you to take a couple o' slices o' that cake home to Prue. I ain't goin' to have no one feel forgotten just because they can't get here. Mercy! how wild it is out to-night."

A gust of wind had come shrieking down from the ridge again, and the little company pressed closer round the table sipping their hot coffee. They knew the long Northern winter was coming; already its icy breath could be felt in the air.

"Snow's goin' to be early," said Aunt Loosher. "I can feel it in my knees. I'm glad none of us are behind any with the work. Land sakes! Winters seem longer'n they used to do."

" I ain't got that way yet," said Mrs. McLane, beginning to refill the coffee-cups.

"I hold that if you forget you're fifty you're liable to keep thirty-five."

Yet, when the meal had come to a lingering, gossiping end, and she stood on the back steps helping to pack her guests into their respective rigs, she shivered a little. There was something bleak and desolate about the hills; something lonesome in the look of the bare, brown fields; and finding Ena on the steps beside her she gripped her hand as if to keep her from it. Together they watched the rigs until the last two were disappearing.

"I'm glad the quiltin's done, anyway," Mrs. McLane called. "Mandy, now take care o' your throat, and Loosher, you wrap the extry rug round your knees. Guess you're right after all, and we're goin' to be snow-bound afore long!"

CHAPTER V

NEW YEAR brought a storm of unusual severity, and Ena experienced, for the first time, what genuine winter weather meant. Snow had been lying for three weeks, but no intense cold had come with it; only a white silence, which seemed to envelop everything.

"You've got a real notion about weather now, with the thermometer twenty below zero," laughed Mrs. McLane, "and I guess you know why we wear such an amazin' sight o' clothes, and talk all the time about keepin' ourselves from freezin'. There's a sayin' about these parts—'when the days get longer, the cold gets stronger,' and it's true enough. You've been at the window most all day, Ena."

"I like to watch it."

" 'Taint no such great novelty to me, I think about any poor thing that maybe is out in it. Not that I'm afeared of a storm," added Mrs. McLane contemptuously. "But I'd like to house any belated thing in such weather. I mind me on just such a day as this, about three year ago, I had no less'n five pedlars over-night."

Ena turned from the window and crouched near the stove, stretching her hands to the warmth.

"They was most perished," continued Mrs. McLane, stirring the soup vigorously. "It just kep' me busy all evenin', feedin' and lookin' after 'em, for the last three didn't strike the place until after supper. When it got to as many as five I didn't know what to think, but it warn't possible to say 'no' to 'em, and so I told 'em 'come in' as fast as they happened along. Dick seemed some relieved when it 'peared it was goin' to stop at five. When they was fed up they talked a spell round the stove in

the sittin'-room there, and then I got beds fixed up for 'em in the garret, on the floor. A queer-lookin' row, the boys said they made."

"Did they know about you, Aunt June?" asked Ena innocently.

"Maybe they did, and if so I'm just as content," said Mrs. McLane. "The next mornin' I took two of 'em with me to meetin', and they seemed real devout, and one of 'em went right up and took the anxious seat after meetin' was over. I could see he was real worked up about his soul, though Dick said 'twas all done for politeness' sake, 'cause I'd give him bed and vittles."

"Dick loves a joke," suggested Ena softly.

"It warn't no subject to joke about. Dick is turrible sarcastic sometimes, if things don't strike him right, and he couldn't see that religion had took a hold o' the man good and hard. I've often wondered if he

got real converted afterwards," finished Mrs. McLane musingly.

The storm increased as the night deepened, and by the time supper was over and the family gathered round the wood-stove in the living-room, nothing could be heard but the shrieking of the wind among the hills. Ena shivered with something like apprehension as she helped Mrs. McLane sew carpet-rags. Dick saw her, and laughed.

"The house is tight, and we shan't get taken up in the storm," he said. "We're bound to get a blizzard or two, or we shouldn't think it was sure-enough winter weather. You put the carpet-rags down and come and help me crack hickory-nuts."

"I'd like to peep at your father in the lumber-camp to-night," said Mrs. McLane to the boys. "Guess he'll have all the cold weather he wants for a spell, but he ain't one to complain. I misdoubt but what he finds the winter pretty long, though."

"I wish I'd gone instead," Dick said.

"You could ha' gone with him if Dale hadn't been with Loosher. 'We'll see what next winter brings, but I don't believe Ed'll want to give up Dale for anything; for the matter o' work, the boy may as well be there as here. I count on you all bein' farmers, unless it's Ross——" and Mrs.McLane glanced with a sort of speculative interest at the bookworm of the family.

"It's real lucky you happened to come, Ena," she added, after a moment's thought. "You help Ross quite a good deal with his books, and that means a sight to him. Guess they looked after educatin' you in Californy, whatever else they forgot. Some day, when I'm real sure all the home-sickness is out o' you, I'm goin' to have you tell us about things out there. Hark a minute!"

The whole family suspended breath, and Mrs. McLane rose excitedly.

"If that warn't a sleigh-bell my nose ain't on my face," she said.

"Pedlars," said Dick laconically. "Bring 'em all in, ma."

"Whatever is out is comin' in, you may be sure," retorted Mrs. McLane. "Land sakes! Marcus, is it you?"

Ena looked up to see a ragged figure in the kitchen doorway, icicles hanging from his grizzled beard.

"It's Marcus," announced Mrs. McLane, the peculiar intonation in her voice which denoted that she would have considered it extraordinary had her hospitality not been taken as a matter of course. "Jerry and Dan, you go help him put up his rig—a bit o' snow and wind won't hurt you any, and the man's frozen a'ready. Ross, you get a bowl out o' the pantry. The soup ain't no way cold yet."

It was some minutes before the family rearranged themselves, the pedlar in their midst. A fresh log had been thrust in the stove, and the man held his hands to the warmth gratefully. Ena watched him with

barely repressed curiosity, grateful that he viewed her in silence.

"Three years since I were in these parts," he remarked. "And I've rushed round consider'ble since then. Seems kind o' homelike to see you 'gain, Mis' McLane."

"There were five o' you last time," said Mrs. McLane, annoyed to see Dick was grinning over his saucer of hickory-nuts. "And I mind how frozen the hull lot o' you was."

"Half dead," agreed the pedlar.

"You had a lame arm," continued Mrs. McLane, her interest in ailments arising at once. "I remember I give you some salve for it."

"It cured it," Marcus answered. "I guess you make a pretty good doctor. Your hull fam'ly looks well, too."

"There's a new one since you was here last," remembered Mrs. McLane, apologetic for the belated introduction. "I was tellin' Ena about the last time you was here

only this afternoon. Seems as if you've always got to come in a storm."

"I'm used to 'em," Marcus answered stolidly, viewing the carpet-rags with an appreciative eye. "I got some real pretty pieces o' blue calicky out in the rig there, Mis' McLane. Saved 'em for you since the week afore last, guessin' I'd be by here 'bout now. I didn't reckon to come with weather like this, though. New Year is surely started in cold enough for people like me. Now I feel half like gettin' out again a'ready," added the pedlar, putting the soup-bowl aside.

"You set right where you are," advised Mrs. McLane emphatically, as if she thought he might be in earnest. "Can't you tell me nothin' about that pedlar I took to meetin' last time you was all here—that Syrian feller?"

"I'd like to say he got religion," Marcus responded, busy with a pin and a hickory-nut, "but I'm afeard it wouldn't be right,"

and he looked at Dick in a way that expressed volumes. "There's lots o' people that sorter fall in with their surroundin's for the minute and then fall out again, and I guess he's one of 'em."

"Maybe that's just your observation of him, and it ain't really so," said Mrs. McLane, who disliked to have her delusions destroyed. "I just like to have hopes o' everybody all the time until I see they're plumb give up to cussedness. It don't do to judge people over much, 'cause we can't see their innards."

The pedlar agreed with a readiness which made Ena distrust him a little. Sitting close to the stove with the soup-bowl at his feet, and a saucer of nuts on his knee, he seemed at peace with every side of a question.

"And I don't have no suspicions of nobody until they come and plank their doin's in my face," continued Mrs. McLane. "It's a bad way to do to keep your insides

fermentin', and maybe all for nothin'."

"Me, too," agreed the pedlar, a little irrelevantly.

"I've seen my sister Loosher—you know the Van Orme place, Marcus?—sit and just torment herself with thinkin' 'maybe' about this and that and the other person; losin' good flesh and blood every minute with her foolishness, and gettin' clear snappety 'cause in less'n fifteen minutes all her fancies had got to be facts to her. Goodness knows what her mind's crowded with, or if she rightly knows what is so and what isn't, about the folks around her."

"When I come here I get my own beliefs and feelin's spoke right out," said the pedlar fervently. "I often say,——"

Dick coughed, and the sentence was left unfinished. Mrs. McLane, whose attention was suddenly claimed by a tangle in the strips, did not notice the fact, and the pedlar turned his attention to the twins, who had been impatiently waiting for it. For

the next hour the whole family were kept interested and amused by a series of stories which, from their fluency, seemed to have been used not infrequently before.

"I believe you keep just such yarns a-purpose for times like this," laughed Mrs. McLane; "and it ain't a bad idea. No one ain't never too old for a joke; leastways, if they are, they ought to be laid where they can't hear 'em. Now, you Jerry and Dan, get off to bed. Marcus'll be here in the mornin', and you can coax some more out o' him"; and Mrs. McLane sat with an unusually decided countenance, watching the twins' reluctant feet ascend the stairway.

Ena remained for half an hour longer, listening attentively to the garrulous monotone of the pedlar and the fitful shrieking of the wind. Mrs. McLane, by a series of adroit questions, was obtaining the gossip of the neighbourhood—a thing rather difficult to get in the winter-time, what with the bitter weather and the frequently impass-

able roads. Ena listened without understanding, and soon growing weary crept past Ross (who, between tales of Aunt Lucindy's earaches and the death of George Sorensen's black heifer, was trying to study German) and went upstairs to bed.

When she woke in the morning the snow lay in little drifting lines across the bright patchwork quilt, filtered in from the unplastered wall and ceiling. The water in the zinc basin by the bed was frozen solid, and Ena dressed shiveringly. From the window she saw Marcus and the boys clearing paths through the drifts of snow, and battling against the rage of the wind as best they could.

"No meetin' to-day," said Mrs. McLane regretfully, as they sat at breakfast. "It's goin' to be a two-day storm. We'll make meetin' for ourselves, and have it right after breakfast, afore the feelin' sorter gets off'n us."

So when the meal was over the hymn-

books were produced, and all joined in singing, the pedlar's uncertain bass mingling somewhat whimsically with the clear voices of the children. Mrs. McLane finished the service with a prayer which lasted till the twins grew restive, and a reprimand followed the invocation so swiftly that the pedlar was left in doubt as to where to make the responses.

There was a general distribution of the family after that. Mrs. McLane, who felt that things spiritual had had first place, and been well attended to, prepared for an enjoyable morning sorting calico pieces with the pedlar. Dick, sitting on the wood-box and supplying the stove at intervals, kept the twins open-mouthed with tales of wondrous adventure by land and sea, and with stories of strange forest animals whose names never could have been found in a natural history book. Ena listened and laughed for a while, but presently slipped upstairs to the garret, where Ross

had lit a little oil-stove, and was studying.

Here, for the remainder of the day, the two remained, poring assiduously over books, feeling that to be snow-bound was no great calamity, after all, since it gave an unbroken stretch of time for the studies which they were mutually eager to conquer. Ena, being distinctly ahead, had come to take the part of tutor, Ross following sincerely and laboriously, anxious to atone for the drawbacks of his environments. Thus they worked together harmoniously, each understanding the motives of the other, but saying little about it.

Late in the afternoon the snow ceased falling, but the drifts were tossed high by a wind so fierce that it seemed as if it might shake even the sun itself, hanging all day like a blurred lamp in the winter sky. Ena went to the window, looking out on the wild scene wonderingly, and leaving Ross to put the books away. He came to her side when the shelves were straightened, and they

knelt together by the window till the light had faded out, feeling that the garret was a cosy place, and full of possibilities. The day's work had been good, and a fresh line of study had been planned to be carried out while the winter should last. Inspiration had come in the wake of the storm. The first isolation of the snow was full upon them now, and Ross in particular knew that the situation had advantages which should not be missed. Hence, he had thought out his chances carefully, including Ena in all his arrangements, and weaving things round so as to further their mutual and particular end.

CHAPTER VI

IT was one night towards the end of January that Ena was awakened from a heavy sleep by the consciousness of some unusual commotion going on downstairs. For a moment she sat up, listening in a dazed way to the clock striking twelve; then Mrs. McLane's shrill voice sounded up the stairway, calling hurriedly to Dick.

Ena was downstairs before the tired boy. In the living-room Mrs. McLane was finishing a speedy toilet by the light of a single candle. She looked up at the sound of Ena's footfall.

"It's old Mis' Sorensen," she gasped, struggling angrily with a refractory hook. "George has drove clear across from their place for me to go and help nurse her. He reckons it's a pretty sick spell this time, and Dick's got to go to Creston for the doctor

while I get back with George. There ain't never a soul on the Sorensen place 'cept George and the old lady, and she won't want to be left longer'n can be helped. I was over there when her man died, a matter o' somethin' like nine year ago. Here's Dick comin' now, and I'm glad of it."

Dick received his commands stolidly, and went out to hitch up without a word of comment.

The January thaw was on, and Ena heard the slow dripping of the eaves as the kitchen door was swung and left open. Dick's lantern zigzagged over to the barn, and in a few moments they heard old Libby's impatient neigh as she was led out.

"It do seem plaguey-like that the thaw should ha' started in only this mornin'," said Mrs. McLane, putting the last of several small bottles in her capacious pocket. "It'll be mighty poor sleighin', and hinder us just so much. I don't rightly know when I'll be back, Ena, but you and the boys can

manage. You've sorter got the way o' the place now, and the boys are awful handy. Everybody's waked up, I guess, but you all better get back to bed again, seein' as Dick can't be home afore mornin'."

When Mrs. McLane stepped into the sleigh and took her place beside the huddled figure of George Sorensen, Ena and Ross were both on the kitchen threshold. The sleigh slipped off into the darkness, and the children closed the door with a sense of desolation.

For the rest of that night Ena slept fitfully, and by six o'clock she was down in the kitchen again. Ross had already made the fires, and cleared away all signs of confusion caused by the midnight call. Ena began to prepare breakfast, the pleasant sense of being able to rise to the occasion filling her heart.

"Dick ought to be home between now and eight o'clock," Ross remarked, as he came in presently from the barn and sat down

to hot coffee and buckwheat cakes. "That is, unless something out of the way keeps him. He's longer on account of the bad sleighing. This thaw is likely to keep up three or four days."

"But will Aunt June be gone as long as that?" asked Ena, feeling at a sudden loss.

"Maybe; it all depends on what's the matter. They always send for ma if there's sickness about."

Breakfast was finished almost in silence. The day had dawned gloomily, and this fact coupled with the absence of the two senior members of the family, had its due effect. Even the twins were slightly subdued, and set out on the long tramp for school with a little less protestation than usual, having coaxed Ena to fill their dinner-pails with extra comforts in the way of "plumcrack" and cookies.

When Dick came home at length, tired, damp, and hungry, the work of the day was well begun, and the kitchen presented an

air of cleanliness and cheer. Ena, enveloped in one of Mrs. McLane's gingham aprons, had expended a great deal of energy in reducing things to order, and Dick looked round with appreciation as he sat down in the old rocking-chair by the kitchen stove.

"You're learning to be a farmer's wife a'ready, Ena," he laughed. "Don't take the apron off; you look good in it."

"How was Mrs. Sorensen?"

"Bad." Dick unlaced his shoes slowly, and put them to dry. "It's a real sick spell, the doctor says. I left him there with ma. She was up to her eyes in work, fixin' everything around. Guess George has lost his courage. He acts as glad as a child to have ma there. She said she'd stay till it was through, one way or the other."

Ena went back to her work with an added sense of responsibility, and all through the long day she toiled valiantly, attacking the rooms piece-meal from cellar to garret, and

gradually realising that several days of devotion would be necessary to reduce things to something like order. The house had not, in the proper and respectable sense of the word, a front-room, and even if money had ever been found to suitably decorate such a sanctuary, it would never have held its own, owing to Mrs. McLane's scorn of everything other than the commonplace.

"I'd sooner have two gingham dresses any day than one sateen," had been her withering retort on one occasion to a neighbour who had indulged in the frivolity of sateen; and the remark indicated her whole outlook on life very perfectly.

Thus the small west room, which should have been dedicated to crayons and crochet, differed from the living-room in only a few details. The newest rag carpet was on the floor, and six superior chairs were—or should have been—ranged at intervals round the walls. As a matter of fact, the chairs were generally utilised as a sort of

trestle for the receipt of divers articles which nobody had time to put anywhere else—two being placed facing each other, and then generously loaded. The arrangement had dazed Ena a little at first, but as it seemed to be a habit of several years' standing she had never ventured a remark on the subject.

Now that it had come to a question of cleaning the room, however, Ena paused in the doorway with a speculative eye, wondering if it were possible in a single day to unearth the wealth of material that was biding its time in this tentative fashion. The Sunday clothes of the entire family formed a top layer, and beneath these were an assortment of other articles not to be easily named or placed.

"You'd better leave it," Ross advised, coming in at the moment, and finding Ena with the finger of indecision on her lips. "I tried it once, but got disheartened."

"It's too late to-day," Ena admitted. "I'll get up extra early to-morrow morning.

I want to have everything nice and straight for Aunt June, because she'll need a rest-up after nursing."

So the whole of the next day was given to house-cleaning, and by supper-time Ena ached in every limb. Ross, who had shared her labours, insisted on getting the meal, half-proud of his ability, half-anxious for the tired girl. Dimly he felt the difficulty of her struggle with the things that were common to his own life.

"Liz Elder licked the plumcrack off my bread," complained Jerry at the supper-table, helping himself to the dainty very liberally. "She got to my dinner-pail some way or another. I'm going to fix her for it to-morrow, so don't you interfere if you're to school, Ross."

"I'll be here," Ross ventured. "Ma's not coming back to-night."

This proved to be true, though the evening was spent in a sort of expectancy, listening for sleigh-bells. Nothing was to be

heard, however, save the slow dripping of the eaves. The day had been grey and lowering, and everybody longed for the thaw to end.

Late the next afternoon the Sorensen sleigh drove into the yard, and Mrs. McLane stepped out, a subdued air about her which told its tale immediately. Without a word the children made a place for her by the stove, and she sat down wearily.

"I was real sorry to say good-bye to Mis' Sorensen," she said at last, her eyes heavy with the recollection of the scene she had just passed through. "It's another old settler gone, and I guess the funeral'll be a pretty big one spite o' the weather. It'll seem queer to pass by the Sorensen place and not see the old lady round; she was that sociable it seemed sorter homelike even if you'd only time to stop for a few words with her. She had a fine mem'ry, too, and many's the tale I've heard her tell about the early days in these parts."

Mrs. McLane took the cup of tea Ena brought and stirred it thoughtfully. An unusual silence had fallen upon the little group round the stove. Ena sat with her chin in her hands, leaning forward to listen.

"She was a mighty plucky woman," continued Mrs. McLane, "and shirked nothin' that come in her way. You children ain't got but a small conception o' some o' the things that had to be faced when these parts was first settled. Things is sorter comfortable now, but in them days it warn't no such story. When the Sorensens first took up title to their land they had to build them just a shanty o' logs and a roof o' hemlock boughs, to start with. The door was a blanket, and there warn't no winder at all. They had the deer chasin' round by day and the wolves kep' 'em comp'ny at night. A bear took a sack o' meal from 'em one night and killed the only pig they had. The Indians warn't none too friendly,

neither, seemin' to sniff a'ready at what was comin' later. I've heard Mis' Sorensen laugh about it all many a time, she bein' one to turn up her sleeves when trouble come along and fight it good and plenty. It ain't but right to say that old man Sorensen was proud o' his woman."

Mrs McLane wiped her eyes on her petticoat and sipped her tea again.

"And there was the time when their claim was jumped," she went on. "In them days they used oxen in the lumberin' business up to Lake Superior, and one time the Sorensens undertook to drive six yoke up there, a clear hundred and fifty miles through the woods, and nothin' more in their heads to guide 'em than what the birds have. They made the journey all right, havin' one adventure and another, same as you might expect, considerin' the undertakin', but it warn't to be wondered at that they was all tuckered out when they got back. Then they found fresh trouble, in the shape o'

somebody havin' jumped their claim and established theirselves quite comfortable-like in the shanty, and also improved it some. That set Mis' Sorensen's blood afire. It used to be real good to hear her tell of her feelin's——" here Mrs. McLane relapsed into a moment's laughter— "and how war just fired up in her blood right away. Seems it was old Packard and his two sons —boys about fifteen and sixteen, maybe— who'd done the thing, and they announced they warn't goin' to quit, havin' taken some trouble over puttin' things a bit into shape. Sorensen was for goin' to the committee to straighten things out, but Mis' Sorensen wouldn't hear to that amount o' delay. She could use firearms as well as anyone, and though the old man and his boys had made a sort o' little garrison o' theirselves in the shanty, she was determined to have 'em out without a bit o' waitin' for it. Sorensen caught her notion just by lookin' once at her face, and he fell to with her, and

they had a pitched battle right there. The door was drove clear to the middle of the room with a batterin' ram, and old Packard had a flesh wound in his arm afore he'd had time to draw his breath straight. Guess they felt some superstitious about the way Mis' Sorensen carried all afore her, for it warn't but a few minutes till they cut and run to the woods. When the Sorensens had got things straightened out a bit and put aside what didn't belong to 'em, Mis' Sorensen took pains to hunt old Packard up and dress his arm and sorter tell him she wouldn't ha' done it if she could ha' helped it. Anyway, the bad feelin's wore down after a bit, and in less than a couple o' months the two fam'lies was livin' real peaceable together as neighbours, and that lasted till old Packard died."

"I've heard the two Packard men say there was no outdoin' Mis' Sorensen in the way o' bein' hospitable," remarked Dick, the spirit of tribute-paying upon him also.

"Hospitable, I should say!" endorsed Mrs. McLane. "It's a pity the old pioneer spirit seems as if it warn't sometimes just what it used to be. I ain't complainin', but I remember such good times that I hope they won't never die out. Everybody had to give the helpin' hand then, and they *wanted* to. It just warms me clear to the middle to think about it. Mis' Sorensen told me she accommodated two extry fam'lies in that shanty o' hers the second spring—people who had took up claims and was waitin' to build cabins. It was close quarters for everybody, I reckon, but that didn't matter none, since the right spirit was there. Besides this, travellers on the lookout for land stopped along continual, and they got a good welcome every time. Three men who was there for a week once, finally took up a quarter-section a good seven miles away, and all that spring Mis' Sorensen baked bread for 'em, they fetchin' it once a week. That meant a round trip

o' fourteen miles through the woods, with never a bit o' road, and the wolves followin' them many a time, close enough to be troublesome. Life warn't all cider and hickory-nuts in them days, but I can tell you people enjoyed theirselves, just the same."

A log fell heavily in the stove, and Mrs. McLane roused herself from reminiscence with a jerk, setting her empty cup aside.

"The funeral's to be day after to-morrow," she said energetically. "Let's look up all the bits o' black we've got. Mis' Sorensen was a great one to believe in a funeral bein' fixed real decent and proper, and no goin' to it as if you was just givin' your good clothes an airin'. She was never one to visit, neither, at such times—said it made her feel sorter mean to when there was one that had to lie so quiet. I'd kind o' like to follow out her notions now that she ain't able to plan for herself; then we can't never feel she was shamed-like at the way in which we took good-bye of her for good."

CHAPTER VII

"THE sap's started in the maples." Ross flung the reins aside as he spoke, and ran up the steps to where Ena stood in the kitchen doorway, shading her eyes from the bright March sunshine as she looked out over the ridge.

"The sap's started," he repeated, more softly. "Now you can go down with us to the sugar-bush, Ena, and see the trees tapped."

"I'd like to help," Ena said quickly.

"You can watch us first." Ross spoke cautiously, being still quite unable to think of Ena as a worker, notwithstanding the fact that she had evidenced to the contrary. His mother's matter-of-fact attitude towards his wonderful cousin was a source of distress to him; he thought that anybody

who could accept Ena as belonging to the ordinary course of things was lamentably lacking in discrimination.

"Of course I'll have to learn," Ena agreed; "but after I've been trying to make sap-spouts I want to know how they are used. Dick says there's no time in the year he likes better than the week he's down in the woods boiling the sap."

"It means the first notion of spring," Ross said, "and that seems good after you've had the snow lying for three months. I'm always tired of sleighing by the middle of March."

There was an extra commotion in the house all morning, owing to the news Ross had brought. Mrs. McLane, who always rose to an occasion volubly, gave a stream of suggestions and directions to which no one paid any particular attention, Dick and Ross being quietly engaged over necessary preparations.

"We'll have a good sugaring-off party

this year, so as Ena can enjoy herself," the twins suggested, trying to keep the personal note out of their voices.

"We'll tend to the business part first," said Mrs. McLane. "The fun comes later, and I ain't as deceived by the way you put it as you might think," she added snappily, reviewing her small sons with an enlightenment that surprised them.

It was the afternoon of the next day before Ena and the twins set out, full of the delicious promise that they could spend the night in the sugar-shanty. The sleighing down to the woods was bad, for the end of March had come, and the winter was breaking up, but not one of the three concerned themselves over their occasionally difficult progress.

"We ought to have gone yesterday," Dan complained, when once he was well out of his mother's hearing. "Last year we went down the first day, and Jerry and I lit the fire in the shanty, and cleaned it out, while

Dick and Ross tapped the trees. Half the fun's over the second day."

This view of the case seemed to dwindle, however, when once their destination was reached. Dick and Ross had been active, and work was in full progress. Ena stopped for a moment among the trees to watch the sap dripping slowly from the spouts, and her eyes were wide with wonder by the time she reached Dick.

Near the shanty the fire had been built, and the sap-pan was bubbling over it. In the distance the slow trailing of the pung could be heard, and Ena lifted her head to listen more closely as she stood warming her hands.

"Ross is emptying the sap-troughs," Dick volunteered, as the twins rushed off. "He'll be back from his round of the trees before long, and you can go with him next time. Sit down a minute, and get warmed up."

"Do you have to watch this all the time?"

Ena peered over the edge of the sap-pan.

"Sure." Dick gave another stir to the bubbling contents. "I'm going to take a rest before Ross goes, and then I'll be up all night with it. That's the time I like best."

Ena looked at him curiously.

"Owls hooting, and every now and again something stirring in the bushes." Dick laughed. "It makes me feel good. I can't exactly explain it, but you'd know what I mean if ever you'd sat up the night through in the woods. I'd rather be under a tree any night than in my bed. So would Ross."

Ena still looked a little mystified.

"You ain't been used to that style of thing," Dick continued, moved a little from his usual taciturnity. "but we've got the woods right in our blood, and they're home to us any time. See what I shot last night."

Ena looked at the raccoon-skin nailed to the wall of the shanty.

"Got just a little too near," Dick observed, stirring again. "I'll teach you to handle a gun next fall, Ena. You'll likely make a good shot, and it's a thing a girl ought to know, anyway, when she's living close to pioneer country."

Dick stopped to push fresh logs under the pan, and Ena opened the door of the shanty. All was neat within, and a fire crackled in the wood-stove. The bunks had been strewn with fresh cedar-boughs and covered with quilts. Everything showed the touch of Ross's hands.

Dinner was due in less than an hour, and Ena set about its preparation, leaving only the coffee to Dick, who promised to make it with sap. Just as the meal was ready Ross came up, and Ena ran out to the pung to call him in, laughing at the novelty of housekeeping in the woods.

"You'll be able to make sugar yourself next year," Ross smiled, stooping to wash his hands in the melting snow. "Let's go

in to dinner now. I don't think anything ever smelt so good."

The little log shanty rang with laughter during the meal. Ena's presence was an inspiration to the boys, and her faculty for seeing a certain amount of play in any and every kind of work had appealed to them from the first. No one was helped by this unaccustomed lightsome element more than Ross, who, as his mother said, "had been born thinkin', and never stopped since."

"I thought at first you'd be so homesick and lonesome you wouldn't be able to live," he said to Ena, when the meal was over and the round of the trees had begun again. "I guess, though, that you think more about rising up to things than falling down in front of them," he added, with a sigh of relief.

"I don't like cry-baby people." Ena looked at the contents of the sap-trough sliding into the barrel. "I felt lonely the first week, but after that——"

She said no more, but the two walked a little closer together under the maples, and Ross was content to talk only about the matter in hand; letting Ena help him in the work now and then, and answering the hundred questions propounded by her always inquiring mind.

Long after he had gone that night, when the twins were asleep in their bunks, and Dick was sitting alone in the darkness outside, Ena lay and thought over his words, feeling glad that he always understood so easily. She smiled happily at the wood-fire, throwing dancing streaks of light all over the shanty, and then she stretched her head near the open window to peer at Dick. He was sitting with his gun across his knees, his eyes on the sap-pan and the underbrush alternately, and an expression of unmitigated contentment on his face. Ena curled under the old patchwork quilt with a sense of being well guarded, and fell asleep almost at once, not to waken until morning.

Ten days later the sugaring-off party took place, and the twins felt their hearts' desire was realised. The work in the woods had been well enough, but it was as nothing to the joy of the finish, and the energy they expended in preparations for the event caused Mrs. McLane secret gratification.

"They ain't never been so useful in fetchin' and carryin' before," she laughed to Ena. "It do seem you ought to make folks happy afore you expect 'em to be good."

The night was moonlight, and warmer than usual, though the snow was deep enough for sleighing still. Ena stood at the door of the shanty, watching the guests arrive. Two bob-sleighs held all, and the maple-woods rang with laughter as they approached.

"You ain't never been to a party o' this sort before, Ena," said Mrs. McLane, bustling about. "If you notice the manners ain't citified you can recollect the hearts is

good. The very first one I see is Loosher —none so crippled after all——" And Mrs. McLane hurried off.

Ena felt a tap on her arm, and turned round to see Uncle Ed.

"You ain't been to see us again this winter," he said gently. "If it hadn't been for Dale comin' to and fro with reports I should ha' thought you'd gone back to Californy again.

"I've been going to school," Ena explained, "and another thing, the snow has been so deep. Aunt June says it reminds her of the winter the twins were born, when the snow was over the fences."

"So it was," agreed Uncle Ed. "There was one or two deaths by freezin' that winter, and we was gettin' snow-bound continual. Everybody had just to stop about their own places, 'cept Saturdays, and then o' course it didn't seem like livin' if you couldn't get to town. That's the real treat in the week to most o' the folks—goin' to

town Saturdays, and hitchin' up in front o' the stores, and talkin' all the news that ever happened or is goin' to happen. That and the funerals is all the outin' most of us gets."

"Except parties like these," suggested Ena.

"Yes," Uncle Ed agreed. "There's times in the year when a gatherin' or two takes place, but it ain't so often. I like it myself; not for the dancin' about, and the sugar-eatin', but because everyone comes in such a real smilin' state o' mind. It makes me feel as though it ain't so mighty hard to keep your best side turned up top, after all."

"We don't practise enough," Ena laughed.

"I guess you do." Uncle Ed looked down at the bright face, and sighed profoundly to think that the inability to scrub floors had barred so much sunshine from his home. "You don't have to practise,

though," he added. "You've got it natural."

Ena moved from the doorway presently, and joined the laughing group round the sap-pan. Marthy Swiggs was one of them, the plum-coloured rose nodding gaily in her bonnet as she watched Ross strew the hot sap in the snow. It sugared, and the chattering crowd on the logs clapped hands and began the feast. Ena remained near her aunt, listening to her flow of remarks.

"The years do go remarkably fast," said Mrs. McLane, dividing her attention between her saucer and Uncle Ed. "It seems but a short enough time ago since Rob McLane and I was at a sugar-feast down by the Swiggs's place, and he first give me the notion that he wanted me and him to hitch up. I hadn't no notion then o' keepin' steady comp'ny with him, for he was sombre-like, and no hand to give his smiles away for nothin'. He real surprised me by the way he talked that night, and I sorter

glimpsed his innards in a way I hadn't never done before. Seemed as if I stopped thinkin' all of a sudden about the value o' easy smilin', and took to considerin' what a glummer face might mean. I misdoubt but what he meant I should," added Mrs. McLane, a little ruffled by the suspicion, "but then I ain't never been sorry he got over me that way."

"Seein' the young folks slidin' away together surely gets us lookin' back," sighed Uncle Ed. "It makes anyone sorter wish the good feelin' o' courtin' days didn't get so soon drownded in hogs and pertaters."

"But you was always a bit flighty," objected Mrs. McLane. "It ain't no good havin' things to say agen what brings you your livin'. As for the young folks, they ain't got it all on their side. There's lots to live for all the time, and we don't never get to feelin' so old as we think we'll do. Land sakes! Is that Dick goin' off with the Hetherbridge girl?"

"Sure enough." Uncle Ed peered through the trees with a smile. "Loosher'll say you've got your trouble comin', Ju."

"Trouble nothin'." Mrs. McLane scraped her saucer with relish, and ceased to regard the departing pair. "Bess Hetherbridge is all right—made her own clothes since she was 'leven, and cooks good besides. It ain't nothin' serious anyway; just a bit too much sugar-eatin' made 'em feel sorter sentimental. Now you help me search, Ed, to see if by chance anyone has got a jug or two in the sleighs. If so, we'll fill 'em up with maple syrup, and you can find Ross and Ena, and tell 'em to help us quietly. Is that them goin' off too? Well, never mind—they only talk book-learnin', anyway."

But it was not book-learning that was talked under the maple-trees that night, for the thought of the school-room was far enough away from the mind of both boy and girl. The spirit of the woods was on Ross,

and for the first time in his life he talked to someone who drew out his halting thoughts and interpreted his dreams. Back and forth they paced the snowy paths until the party by the fire broke up, and Ena was called to take her place in the sleigh. She slid down among the rugs reluctantly, feeling suddenly ill at ease among her companions; and Ross went back to the fire to stretch on one of the empty logs, and feel that some of his boyish dreams had taken a vague shape at last.

CHAPTER VIII

IT was one afternoon towards the latter part of April that Ena, returning home from school with the boys, noticed an unusual atmosphere about the house as she approached. The kitchen window was open, and the sound of Mrs. McLane's voice, talking fast and furiously, could be heard with great distinctness. For a moment the children paused; then Jerry, with a shriek of delight, pointed to an old mackinaw hanging on a nail of the wood-shed.

"Father's home!"

There was a rush round the side of the house for the kitchen steps, and a sudden bursting open of the door. Ena, left behind for a moment in the excitement, heard a gruff voice welcome the boys, and then her own name was called. She went for-

ward, and was drawn into the circle round the old kitchen rocking-chair.

"So this is the girl Ju notioned to adopt," Robert McLane said in his slow way. "We ain't never had a daughter, and I'm real glad to see you here, Ena."

Something brought a mist to Ena's eyes, which she was fain to rub away surreptitiously with the back of her hand. She looked at the unknown uncle more closely as the twins clambered on to his knee, and found him familiar at once, since he looked like Dick grown older. There was a weary stoop to the shoulders which caught her sympathy, and involuntarily she looked at the table.

"I'm just settin' a meal," said Mrs. McLane, "and I guess we'll all eat early tonight. Now, you boys, get off your father's knee, and help set the table while he rests. You look clear tuckered out, Rob."

"Just that."

Robert McLane went over to the bench,

and dipped the zinc basin full of water. Ena, frying the potatoes, watched his tall figure and his slow, heavy movement with interest. He was very much what she had imagined him to be, though there was a gentleness in his manner which she had hardly expected.

Dick came in just as the steaming food was placed on the table, and for the first time in many months the family sat down complete, excepting for Dale.

"He'd like uncommon to be here if he only knew," said Mrs. McLane regretfully. "Never mind, however, for to-morrow's Saturday, and it ain't so long to wait, since he don't know. My! the winter seemed sorter long this year, and half the time the thermometer was down to zero and below. I guess there's been some stove-hugging evenin's in the loggin'-camp."

"Lots of it." Robert McLane emptied a cup of coffee with relish, and passed it for refilling. "We ain't had a harder winter in

years up north, but we cut some splendid timber. Still, the woods gets sorter lonesome when you're in 'em so long. Lots o' times when the lumbermen got to telling yarns about home it kinder made me think too much about the farm here. Guess we was all glad enough when we broke camp, and started down the tote-road."

"You ain't so fleshy as when you went away," said Mrs. McLane. "Did they feed you good?"

"Pretty good, but it ain't home. I've been sorter hankerin' for the kitchen here, and the wood-pile, and old Libby's neigh, for a month past. I felt sorry for the fellers who went on the drive."

"Had it started when you left?" asked Dick.

"The river-landing had, but they won't break the roll-ways for another week. They'll have a big drive this year. We had two and a half million on one landing. Ashby's was the only logs put into the

Drake this year. Best firm I ever worked for."

"It's hard enough anyhow," said Mrs. McLane. "Take another dough-nut, Rob. Lucky I made a hull mess of 'em yesterday."

"They taste extry good, too. Our cook was all right, but nothin' ain't like home. Spring's here for sure, and farm work'll seem just the thing. I'm sorter hungry to get out and see everythin'."

"Leave pokin' 'round till to-morrow," advised Mrs. McLane. "I never seen you quite so beat afore."

Rob McLane laughed good-humouredly.

"You're on the lookout for somethin' to doctor, Ju, but I ain't liable to become a patient. Just a day or two loiterin' round the place afore I start work, and I shall be all right. I'm goin' out now to watch Dick milk."

Ena had imagined that the home-coming of her uncle would make a considerable change at the farm, but it was not so. The

slow, silent man seemed as if he might have resolved long ago to leave the conversational side of life to his wife. He came and went unobtrusively, attending to his work always, but rarely speaking of it.

This annoyed Mrs. McLane at times. "Your father don't spit out no thoughts to make room for new ones," she had once complained to Dick. "He's awful different from me. A thing ain't clear to me till I've talked it round and round. It's one o' Rob McLane's tormentin' ways that he don't have no social times over his actions."

Dick, however, had not proved sympathetic; indeed, time had developed taciturnity with him also.

Still, there were evenings in the first week or two after the homecoming when Robert McLane was coaxed to talk at length, and Ena would creep as close to him as the rest to hear stories of the lumber-camp and the various experiences of the woods. He always talked slowly, his pipe in and out of

his teeth, but what he said was good, and the tales were never long enough for the listeners. Ena, especially, tried to draw out their length.

"You're most as fond o' lumber-jack yarns as the twins," he said to her one night laughingly. "What makes it, d'you suppose?"

Ena shook her head.

"I guess it's 'cause you reckon it out o' the common. It's wonnerful the way a thing they ain't used to fascinates a young one. When Jerry and Dan here get to goin' in the woods theirselves there won't be none so much eagerness about it all. I'm not sayin', however, but what there's things about it that I like myself. It kinder takes my breath to stand in among the tall timber and sorter listen to the silence o' the forest."

Before a week was gone Ena and her uncle had become firm friends. Very few words were ever exchanged between them.

Often they were content to sit or walk together quite silently, but their comradeship was none the less perfect. Only one who knew Robert McLane intimately could ever see how his face softened when the girl would deliberately choose to be beside him.

With the coming of spring Ena found things at the farm changed considerably. Life in the open air began, and school became a more irregular thing than it had been even in the depths of winter. Ross's love of the outdoor kept him from sighing, but in the evening he endeavoured to make up.

"And you don't want no more schoolin', anyway," said Mrs. McLane complacently to Ena. "You can start reg'lar again after the summer vacation, if so be you want to, but till school lets out for good it'll be go a day and stay away a day sort o' thing. I don't hold with a girl bein' too mighty smart unless she's thinkin' to study for a schoolmarm. Did you ever have that notion, Ena?"

Mrs. McLane paused in her dish-washing to propound the query. Ena looked a little bewildered, and sought for words in vain.

"I ain't never thought o' such a thing afore, either," said Mrs. McLane. "It just struck my head same as a brick might. I don't see much good to the idea, but if you sorter hankered after it later I guess you're smart enough to start in, even if you didn't know no more than what you've learned a'ready. For my part, I'm glad enough I learned to cook and sew, and I don't bother none 'cause I ain't done no picture-paintin' and things o' that sort. If a woman knows how to keep house good she don't need to bother."

"But there's lots of other pleasant things to do, too," suggested Ena, vigorously wiping the milk-pans.

"Some of 'em's a mighty waste o' time," sniffed Mrs. McLane. "I can recollect, five or six years back, when Loosher took a streak she'd like to be real genteel. Seems

there was some club or other up in Creston, and Loosher j'ined it, thinkin' there would be lots o' good in it for her. It was run by a woman who seemed to ha' got sick o' the plain ways o' livin', and had run to fancy notions, as you might say. However, Loosher asked me to go to one o' their meetin's, and I agreed, and took some carpet-rags to sew, thinkin', o' course, there wouldn't be no foolishness o' sittin with our hands lyin' idle in our laps for an hour or more.

"When I got there I found I was the only woman who'd had the common sense to bring somethin' to while away the time with. Loosher looked at my bag real scandalised like, and whispered to me to sit on it, but I warn't there for no foolishness o' that sort. Another woman next to me said, 'So you've brought your embroidery, Mrs. McLane?' I watched her eyes to see if her mind was as real polite as her voice, and I sensed it warn't. 'No,' I said, 'I ain't, I've

brought just carpet-rags, never havin' found time for no nonsense in my life.' That shut her up some, and made Loosher wiggle, but I just kep' on sewin'.

"Presently some one on the platform jumped up and took a sup o' water and commenced readin'. It real disappointed me when I saw her fidgetin' with a handful o' papers, for I thought we was all got together for a good chat and to be sociable-like, same as at a bee. You can just tell what I felt when I discovered we warn't even goin' to have nothin' useful told to us. That paper was all a pack o' nonsense about some King over in Europe who'd lived and died long enough ago so's he ought to be forgotten to make room for folks what's doin' their stunts now. Charles the Twelfth o' Sweden, I well remember they called him, but I misdoubt if I remember much else, though I took it all in at the time. Loosher sat real impressed, but I kep' on with my rags, and didn't put on no airs o' feelin' so

much above the ord'nary 'cause I was there. After it was over everybody clapped, and said how improvin' it was, but I just hustled off so's to be home in time for milkin'. I tried to think about it all the way home, but the first thing I saw when I drove in the yard was Jerry'd lost the seat o' his pants. It just showed me how much good Charles the Twelfth o' Sweden was to me!" finished Mrs. McLane triumphantly.

Ena laughed, stacking the milk-pans near the door.

"And there's another thing I can't abide," said Mrs. McLane wrathfully, "and that's poetry. I ain't talkin' 'bout the clippin's they put in the Lindville paper, cause they're often real good, and I cut 'em out many a time and put 'em in my cook-book or the sewin'-machine drawer, so's I can look at 'em agen if ever I find time. What I mean is where the hull book is clear give up to it. Ed's got one he sets such store by that Loosher keeps it wropped up all the

time in a clean napkin. He's told me about it once or twice, and years back he read a hull lot out to me and Loosher, same as to say we ought to know it anyway. Just the same, there wouldn't ha' been no such fuss about Romy and Juliet if the girl had lived to cook his vittles and mend his socks. You can't tell me!" and Mrs. McLane delved down into the bread-dough with a will.

Whatever Mrs. McLane's sentiments, however, she could find no fault with the way Ena applied herself to housekeeping problems. There was no system in the home, and Ena had always found things rather difficult in consequence. A truly casual state of things obtained, which might well bewilder anyone accustomed to method and endowed with a sense of order. In vain Ena tried to establish a certain curriculum with the daily-recurring work.

"You're gettin' as bad as Ross, but it won't do no good," said Mrs. McLane decidedly. "I warn't born fussy, and I'll

never get that way. I know it torments you to have all the parlour chairs took up in the way they are, 'specially when you've cleaned 'em off once, but I ain't got time to put a thing in its proper place if so be the proper place for it is upstairs, and I happen to be downstairs. Dick and Ross even asked me one day to do without a garret. They were clear crazy, o' course, but they didn't know it, seemin'ly. I'd just as soon try to do without a head as without a garret. It ain't only for the old clothes you can stuff there, but it's mighty handy for a spare bed if you want one in a hurry. I've things in my garret that ain't seen the light this twenty year, and what else I'd do with 'em save to stow 'em up there I don't know."

"Let me straighten them out some day," suggested Ena, feeling suddenly courageous.

"For the land's sake! What would be the good, I'd like to know? People with common sense put things in the garret which

they may want again some day, but don't rightly know. It ain't no good draggin' 'em out afore you do want 'em, and maybe you never will. That reminds me. I'll have that old wash-boiler that leaks taken up there right away. It ain't no more earthly good for washin', but it may come in handy for somethin' else, and it'll do to stuff things in, anyway. You call the twins, Ena, and I'll have 'em take it up afore I forget. I just have to keep my eyes open to see that Dick don't take such things and fling 'em. If you hurry you'll catch Jerry and Dan afore they go up to the ridge."

And Ena, seeing the case was serious, and Mrs. McLane really fluttered lest she lost the wash-boiler, did as she was asked. At the same time her heart sank a little. She knew that this was the very attitude which thwarted the family interests as a whole, and which Dick and Ross resented in vain. The non-progressivness of it irritated their youth, and their ambitions, and made

their hill of difficulties just so much harder to climb. But since there was no way over the obstacle—Mrs. McLane being at all times faithful to her own point of view—Ena sat down to think out a way round it, braced, if anything, by the idea of having something to conquer. She and the boys would work together, and not despair. Then, if their spirit was the truly brave and steadfast one, some measure of achievement was bound to come at last.

CHAPTER IX

DALE came home one Saturday evening early in July with news that set the McLane household all agog. It being the twilight of a very hot day, the entire family was spread out under the trees near the front porch. Dale threw himself down amongst them with a sigh of relief.

"I guess you're most wilted, same as we all are," said Mrs. McLane compassionately. "We're just through chores, and mighty glad of it. This is the kind o' weather when I do wish I could spend a week on an iceberg, just to get the feelin' o' bein' solid again."

"Let's spend a day in the woods instead," suggested Dale, chewing a spear of grass. "They say the blueberries over to Pug Davidson's old slashing are thick enough to

fill rain-barrels. Uncle Ed is goin' to hitch up first thing Monday morning and get out there. Aunt Loosher's been baking cookies to-day ready for it."

"Land sakes!" Mrs. McLane and the twins sat up simultaneously. "It'd just begun to worry me thinkin' perhaps I wouldn't get all the blueberries I wanted to put up this year. I ain't got but two jars left, and if I couldn't ha' got none extry for preservin'——"

Dale stemmed the tide of superfluities.

"Let's go Monday with the others," he suggested, "and then you'll have enough for everything you can think of, and more besides."

There was no need to press the matter, and plans were made forthwith, everybody helping with suggestions. The twins found it difficult to live till Monday, and were up at dawn to find the day had broken with promise of splendid weather.

"Ain't you got too many pails and

things?" suggested Rob McLane, looking over his shoulder when the family was packed in the waggon and ready to start. "Seems to me we look like a hardware store movin' quarters."

"There's just one extry pail to fill for Mandy Perkins, and that I'm goin' to take," said Mrs. McLane decidedly. "Prue's dearly fond o' blueberries, or used to be afore her insides got all out o' kilter. It ain't but right that we should give a thought to them that ain't goin'."

No opposition being offered, the waggon started, taking the ravine road after a time, as the shortest cut to Aunt Loosher's. Here they found the buggy waiting.

Aunt Loosher peered curiously into the well-filled waggon. "You don't never do things by halves, Ju, and it looks as if you was goin' out prospectin'."

"So we are," agreed Mrs. McLane complacently. "We all feel real good. You're lookin' mighty spry yourself, Loosher."

Aunt Loosher sniffed.

"My knees ain't so bad but what I'll get around and pick a few berries, though I'm trustin' Ed and Dale for the most. This hot weather makes me feel some better than I did in the winter. I was real glad when I got out o' bed this mornin', to find I could walk around pretty comfortable."

"You're real lucky in havin' things favour you days you want to go out," said Mrs. McLane. "Sometimes I wish 'twas more that way with me, though I ain't complainin' any to-day. It takes such feet as I've got to know what a real tormentin' time is. That everlastin' toe o' mine——"

Here Ross broke in with a suggestion concerning dinner, and the conversation was abruptly changed, Mrs. McLane becoming vitally interested during the rest of the drive in a new method of making salt-rising bread. By the time their destination was reached complete harmony prevailed, and everyone was on the tiptoe of expectation.

"I didn't know anything could be as pleasant as this," Ena said, sitting on a log, with her pail dangling, while she watched Mrs. McLane make camp. "Shall we come out here often, Aunt June?"

"There ain't nothin' to come for when the blueberries are gone."

"But it is so beautiful," sighed Ena. "It seems such a pity to be somewhere else when you know there's a lovely place like this."

"We can't come for those sort o' notions," said Mrs. McLane, disgusted with a view of life which excluded so much of the practical. "This ain't nothin' but Pug Davidson's old slashin', which the forest fires burnt over some couple o' years back. I'm real pleased to see there ain't been no exaggeration about the amount o' blueberries. I'll have all I want, and I do dearly like to get my cellar well filled with preserves. If you can bring out a nice Mason jar o' berries, you ain't got to call shame on yourself, no matter who stops in to eat.

Ain't you never picked blueberries afore, Ena?"

"No."

"Terrible artificial your life must ha' been. It makes me feel glad you come here, even though you'll have to wear gingham after your Californy dresses is all gone. Loosher says you're growin', and I misdoubt but what you are. You're gettin' good and strong, anyway."

Ena swung the pail on her arm, and rose, stepping from the shade into the hot sunshine, with an increasing sense of joy. The others were all among the bushes. Ena looked for Ross, and found him.

"I've got to keep up my reputation," he laughed. "Ma says I pick blueberries faster than any. Let me show you, Ena.

"I'm not going to race, lest it makes the day seem to go quicker. I wish we could have a tent and live here."

"Pug Davidson meant to have most of this timber cut, but he died before he had

time. Father's gone off to look at it; he slipped away when ma was talking to you."

Ena laughed, rattling the berries into her pail. "Aunt June will find out and scold. Uncle Rob always forgets that in the beginning."

"Last year he came back with just enough berries for his dinner in the crown of his hat, but he seemed so mighty sorry that ma overlooked it. He always acts that way in the timber."

"I know."

Silence fell between the two. Ena forgot her resolution to be leisurely, and worked hard. Presently, as they cleared bush after bush, they came upon Aunt Loosher.

"I got out o' the way o' them twins," she said, not stopping to look up. "My nerves ain't so peaceable as they might be, and the way Ju lets them young ones run around and shriek beats creation. It just shows she don't know the poor health some people

has, or she couldn't abide it. Jerry and Dan are certainly the worst young ones for noise anywhere to be found, and they ain't lackin' any in the way o' mischief. Did you hear how they set traps for skunks down near the creek, and Mandy Perkins' hired man got in one?"

Ross ducked his head, but Ena went on with her work.

"Fine and mad Mandy was," pursued Aunt Loosher. "I guess if ever she was tormented in her life for want o' her voice it was then. Seems she came on Jerry and Dan enjoyin' theirselves not just a little to think o' the delight o' such unexpected mischief havin' took place, and all caused by their two selves. Ju would be mortal offended if I said that to see young ones act that way don't seem very bright for their future, but it's what I think, just the same. They ought to be home learnin' the collect and gospel now 'stead o' pickin' blueberries. That might teach 'em a little."

Aunt Loosher's voice sounded so warped that Ena felt obliged to put in an extenuating word for the twins.

"You can't paint 'em white to me," Aunt Loosher interrupted decidedly. "I've watched 'em bein' raised all along, and I know what they're made of. Ju ain't never had the proper strictness with young ones. Seems like it's always those who don't have children who knows how to raise 'em."

Ross had gone on ahead, and Ena followed him as quickly as politeness would permit, leaving Aunt Loosher still complaining behind the bush. By this time the whole community had got somewhat scattered, and work went on with real intensity till the call came for dinner.

"I made it an hour late, so's work needn't be interrupted before it had to," announced Mrs. McLane jocosely. "After a good meal no one ain't never so spry again. Rob's fixed the team and made the coffee, and there's about all he has done in the way

o' bein' useful. Just the same, we've got a sight o' berries, and it's a grand day for gatherin' 'em. Loosher, suppose we mix vittles? You've got just the cookies the twins like, and Ed always eats heavy o' my melon pickles."

Aunt Loosher distinctly revived under the influence of good coffee and plentiful provisions, and took her part in the fun that went on round the newspaper tablecloth. Nobody hurried, for a great deal of energy had been expended during the morning, and the sun was now intensely hot on the blueberry patch.

"Seems like there's some sense in what Ena said about wantin' to stay here a bit," said Mrs. McLane, who was now expanded with a general sense of well-being. "It certainly is a beautiful place."

"It looks almost like the home of the fairies," said Ena, watching the sunlight dancing through the trees.

"I never believed in fairies, nor no truck

o' that kind," said Mrs. McLane; "but I do see it's a pleasant place, and I mind how Pug Davidson used to sorter crow 'cause he'd got so much good timber-land. It was wild enough when he settled here, and he he had more'n one bout with the Indians. The farm sorter lies out o' the way, but that just suited Pug, who warn't any too much in tune with his fellow-creatures. Folks said it was 'cause his wife died early, and maybe they was right. She's buried somewhere in the woods here, so's he could have her handy for comp'ny. You can see the grave from the old corduroy road on the other side o' the river. Mandy Perkins was drivin' 'long it for a short cut one day, and she seen Pug settin' by the mound talkin' away real uncanny-like. She told the story, and I guess none of us ever felt 'twas properly respectful to use the old corduroy road agen."

"He and his woman pioneered together," said Uncle Ed, "and that brought 'em real

close. They was half a generation afore us, and knew all about what the wilderness meant."

"Lucindy warn't a year old when they found a wild-cat right by her cradle," said Mrs. McLane. "Pug took and shot it, but Lucindy's got its teeth-marks in her arm to-day. She don't come to the old place no more, and I guess it's 'cause her daughter's married a store-clerk and likes to live in the city. I'll say that I always liked Lucindy, and she'd have a welcome any time she stepped inside my door. If I knew rightly where she lived, I'd just like to send her some o' these blueberries when they're done up. I'll warrant they'd taste good to her, comin' right from here."

The twins had gone off again, each with an empty pail, but the rest of the party showed less disposition to be vigorous, and the afternoon was chiefly spent in the woods. At four o'clock the first preparations for departure reluctantly began, so that home

might be reached in time for the chores.

"You keep the tail o' your eye on them twins," advised Mrs. McLane, speaking to her husband. "They've got a real innercent way o' pretendin' not to know nothin' about time for startin', which don't deceive me none, and is downright provokin'. Ross and Ena won't be much better, so you'd be doin' a sensible thing to go round and drive 'em all in."

"I should be tuckered out if I had so many childern to look after," said Aunt Loosher, when, after various delays, the waggon was ready to start. "I'll say you're not without a bit o' patience, Ju. Your mind must be on 'em all the time."

"I don't take no extry trouble," said Mrs. McLane, clambering into the waggon. "Young ones on a farm come up sorter easy, and do well besides. Now I guess none of us ain't none too tired to sing a hymn or two when once we get a fair start. Seems as if we ought to do somethin' o' the sort,

to show we're thankful for the good day we've had. Surely you'll be to meetin' next Sunday, Loosher?"

"Maybe," answered Aunt Loosher guardedly. "I ain't been for quite a while, but everybody knows why. Yet I always like to go to meetin' in the summer, and Lindville has as good a minister as any place."

"We go summer and winter," said Mrs. McLane complacently, "and I take more comfort now that the young ones are all old enough to behave. Ena has a real good influence on the twins, some way or another, and they don't dodge her as they do me. I didn't have such a tormentin' time with gettin' 'em off to school last winter, neither. Drive a bit quicker, Rob, or we'll never get home in time. And we'll start 'Beulah Land' right now."

The hymn went lustily, sung in a sort of rhythm to the jolting of the waggon, and after it was finished others followed. Mrs. McLane had a decided taste in hymns, and

preferred those of a martial and vigorous order. "I like a good swing to 'em, and a promise at the end," she was wont to say, "and then you kinder feel you're singin' for somethin'." Her voice was strong and sweet, and she led in any community she happened to be in.

Aunt Loosher, in a more cheerful frame of mind than usual, was presently left at her destination with Uncle Ed and Dale, the latter getting out of the waggon a little reluctantly.

"You grow so, and get to look so much like Dick, that presently you and he'll seem like twins too," laughed Mrs. McLane. "It just seems funny to think I'm the mother o' boys that's gettin' so big. Guess I'll have to set up spectacles and a hunch in my back afore long."

She whispered the story of Dick and Bess Hetherbridge to her husband as they drove along again, and Robert McLane nodded his head from time to time, but did not speak.

They thought they had the whole wisdom of the thing, sitting there in the front of the waggon discussing it; but perhaps Dick had some, for when the Hetherbridge farm was passed, and Mrs. McLane turned round "just to see if the blueberries was all right," he lay with his head on a blueberry basket, and his eyes closed, and no one could tell even when the home farm was reached whether he had been asleep or not.

CHAPTER X

THE hot weather remained, and all through wheat harvest the sun shone with a persistency which at last became somewhat trying to the workers in the fields. The weather prophets all over the countryside were nodding their heads sagely, and pronouncing it the hottest summer in a dozen or more years. Be that as it might, the McLanes were not the only ones who breathed a sigh of relief when harvesting was over, and the barn-doors shut on the yield of grain.

"It's the first time in a couple of weeks that I haven't had more or less of a headache," Dick remarked to Ross, as they were bowling along to Creston one Saturday morning in September. "The last day or two with the wheat seemed hard, for the first time I can remember. Gen'rally the fields

is all I want. I like farming well enough, if only money was a little quicker in coming along."

Ross, browned to the colour of an Indian, had lain stretched on a pile of sacks for half the journey. He lifted his head as the last words were spoken. It was a long time since money matters had been discussed between the two boys, and Ross knew that something lay at the back of it.

"I'm thinking about your going to school," Dick continued, the slow drawl in his voice that meant he was not talking lightly. "Father ain't said a word to me about it nor I to him. Seems as if the family ain't properly awake to what you want to do. Dale and me never planned particular for education; having to go to school tormented us more than anything. Maybe that's a bit against you and maybe——"

"It can't be this year anyway." Ross spoke decidedly, sitting up beside Dick, his eyes on the town they were approaching.

The big red school-house would be one of the first buildings passed.

"Have you made up your mind to it?" Dick spoke with his face averted.

"Yes, I knew before wheat harvest there was no use in asking. Things haven't been any easier this year. I'm not grumbling any and I'll wait another twelve months."

"You've got an everlasting sight of hope." Dick whipped up the horses absently, staring at the blue hills lying ahead. "I don't see how you keep up courage with everything against you. I guess, though, you've felt better this last year."

Ross nodded affirmation. The two boys were fencing round a delicate subject, and they knew it. Ten months ago, when Dick had decided to offer opposition to Ena's coming, the family purse-strings had been at their slackest. But the further incubus Dick had dreaded had proved to be a blessing, and he had been waiting all year to say so.

"I don't wonder you've felt kinder hopeful, and as if something had come along to help out. I'm real glad it's so. Everybody ought to have someone they can go to to get straightened out. I guess it's nothing but the ordinary that makes it so you can't go to school this year."

"If I start about seventeen that's as young as any farmer-boy ought to hope for," Ross said, all his latent courage in his voice. "School's a big thing and you can't get it for the asking. It's got to be worked for, of course."

"I'm glad there's one in the family set on getting an education. It's a grand thing, anyway; sorter lifts you above the common, and puts you where you can get even with the world. Just the same, I ain't a mite afraid it'll wean you from home things. The land's right in your blood and the longing of it'll stay there. You'll not have to make a living by it for that to be."

Half an hour later the horses were hitched

in front of a grocery store, and the boys had gone about their several errands. Creston was a comparatively lively place on Saturdays, with the row of farmer's waggons lining either side of Main Street, and neighbours in plenty to meet and gossip with while marketing was done. On any other day the wooden sidewalks were peopled chiefly with the little groups of loafers and loungers common to any small country town.

Ross finished his errands, and went to the post-office for the mail. Here he found Uncle Ed on the doorstep, in an attitude of patient expectation.

"Ten minutes afore the afternoon distribution," he said. "I don't know why I come here so reg'lar Saturdays, 'cause nine times out o' ten there ain't no mail. I guess it's just the Creston paper any of us come for, savin' a chat. Dale's to town with me to-day, and he was wonderin' if you thought any of goin' to school here this September?"

"Not for another year." Ross leaned his

elbow on the window, and looked over to the school-house. "I'll not be quite seventeen even then, and it'll be time enough."

"I thought you sorter hankered to go this year," Uncle Ed suggested, looking keenly at the boy's face.

"I don't believe I thought I really could, just yet. Anyway, it can't be done."

"Ain't there no one to help you out any?"

"I guess I can help myself." Ross shifted his position a little impatiently, looking with distaste at a group of loungers in the post-office.

"If you can't there ain't much chance for you," Uncle Ed observed sententiously, cutting a wad of tobacco with deliberation. "If I had a boy I wouldn't be everlastin' boostin' him, same's implyin' he hadn't no legs of his own. Not but what your case is somethin' more of a tangle, your ma' bein' the way she is; I ain't a word to say agen her spirit o' helpin', but she's provokin' slow in observin' things that lie right to her door.

You don't need to shuffle none 'cause I ain't talkin' no treason, but just what everybody knows. Didn't she take four o' her best chickens out to that Polish family down by the creek last week, and the twins runnin', round at the same time with hardly a bit o' shoe to their feet?"

Ross laughed, but there was a touch of despair in the sound which did not escape his listener.

"Don't you get losin' heart, just the same," pursued Uncle Ed, looking up and down the street as if his thoughts had begun to take other channels. "All you've got to do to get a thing is to want it bad enough. Don't you let up none on *wishin'*. I sorter feel you'll be able to shape things your way a bit later on. Dick'll likely go in the woods with his father this winter, and that'll mean a bit more help to the fam'ly. Now I'll go in and get the paper, or Loosher'll be without the news and that'll surely provoke her."

No more was said by anybody on the school question, and Ross settled down to another year at the farm. As the autumn advanced, Dick decided to go into the woods with his father for the winter, and Mrs. McLane agreed to the decision without demur. Well as the little farm was worked, strained circumstances had always been the order of the day, and there seemed no likelihood of any new order of things transpiring.

"We ought to be thankful for a roof over our heads, and enough to eat," said Mrs. McLane, as she began to patch and darn the clothes needed for the lumber-camp. "That Polish family down by the creek had nothin' but a dugout to live in the first winter they was over from the old country. Land knows if they ever had enough to eat. Marthy Swiggs says they had, but I ain't none so sure. When Marthy's got a good loaf o' bread and a coffee-pot in front o' her she's apt to think other folks has the same, and it ain't always so. I've seen things as

makes me glad enough for the farm here, even if we ain't got as much as we want sometimes."

Indian summer was long and lovely that year, and corn-husking went on apace. Ena had arrived too late the previous year to enjoy this last harvesting of the fields, but now she went out with Ross part of each day, amusing everybody at first by her efforts to help, but finally succeeding to some extent. She liked the ride back and forth in the slow, jolting waggon, and enjoyed the soft stillness of the fields.

"It's better than working in the house," she said to Ross one day, when they were up by the ridge. "Aunt June was rather shocked when I said so yesterday, but I think it's true. Nothing could be much better than this."

She folded her hands in her lap a minute, and Ross looked at her tanned face, from which the old blue sun-bonnet had fallen back. Sometimes he thought Ena was

changing—not in mere growth, which was observable enough—but in a subtler way he could not quite comprehend.

"It's because you're living so differently," he said suddenly, the truth dawning on him in a flash. "Poor people's children are never like the others. They're always independent, and never have a chance to lean on anything or anybody. Don't you know how surprised you were at us the first two or three weeks you came?"

"What!" Ena came back from her minute of dreaming with a start.

"You thought we could do so much for our ages. When Jerry drove to Creston you were frightened of a runaway"—Ross laughed heartily at the remembrance—"and I know you didn't rest till he got back, and you saw he was safe. Now you're getting to be just as independent yourself."

"Aunt June said yesterday she was making a woman of me," Ena said placidly, beginning work again. "I can do a great

many things now that I thought wonderful when I first came."

"I wish you couldn't." The curious regret was at the boy's heart again. "When I get an education there won't be the need. I shall make things different for you."

Ena's hands were idle again.

"Didn't you want to go to school this term?" she asked. "When we talked up in the garret last winter you said you might be going to school this last September."

Ross bent his head.

"It'll be another year. This winter I'm going to stay on the farm, as Dick'll be away. I shan't be losing much time, for I haven't caught up to you yet."

Ena looked puzzled. Some things at the farm were obvious enough to her, but over others a veil of silence had always remained dropped. She shrank instinctively from any question which might suggest a desire to probe. Poor and simple as the McLanes were, they had their own pride and notions

of reservation, on which no stranger ever dared to trample.

"I'd be losing time if it wasn't for you," Ross went on, troubled by the unusual thoughtfulness of Ena's face. "You've been ahead of me all the time, and if you keep up study this winter, as you say you're going to, I guess you'll remain so."

"I will—of course I will; talking about it makes me half wish the snow would come right now and shut us all in again. We'll see how much we can do. I want you to get on—I *do* want you to succeed."

Ross's hand lay near hers, and she covered it with her soft palm, smiling at him under the brim of his ragged straw hat. In the rare moment of demonstration she was startled to see a sudden quiver of his lips. It was controlled instantly, but as Ena withdrew her hand she knew that tears had fallen under the lowered hat-brim, and her heart beat quickly at the thought of what she had stirred.

"I know you will succeed, too," she said presently, steadying her voice to a dead-level as she went on working. "Uncle Ed says you always make most of what you have to fight for, and I guess he's right. He says you've got to keep walking on to something farther all the time, or else you'd die in your tracks. Don't you remember when he talked to us that day we went berry-picking?"

"Yes." Ross's face was calm as ever now.

"He said he had had a hard row to hoe, but he was glad of it," Ena went on. "When he talks it makes me feel it's a good thing to have luck against you, and I want to be just one of the poorest people who ever fought up to fortune."

"I don't mind feeling ragged when I'm with Uncle Ed." Ross acknowledged smilingly. "He's always had the same helpful way, I guess, but I've never noticed it so much till lately. He talks a lot to you, Ena."

"Because we're natural sort of friends." Ena pulled loose the strings of her sun-bonnet, and threw it on the stubble, shaking her damp curls into order. By Ross's special wish she had up to now eschewed the tight neck-braids and huge bows of ribbon fashionable in the neighbourhood for girls of her age. Mrs. McLane had more than once sniffed at the two small bows which held back the long curls, but Ena had held her own in the matter, and Ross had found peace accordingly.

"I want you to keep looking like you did when you first came," he had said to her more than once—and Ena was beginning to know what he meant.

"We're natural sort of friends," the girl repeated. "I told Uncle Hugo about him the last time I wrote to California. That was nearly three months ago and I haven't had an answer yet." Ena's face clouded a little.

"You don't care so much, do you?" Ross

came a little nearer, the anxiety he was too awkward to adequately express apparent on his face. "You don't pine for the folks out there, do you?"

"No."

"You'll hear soon enough," said Ross, satisfied. He went to work with redoubled energy, content that Ena sat idly in the sunshine. It seemed as if all sorts of shadows had vanished in the one short morning. Both had a smile on their faces when at last the dinner-bell clanged noisily across the fields.

"I'll never husk corn again without thinking about to-day." Ross laughed as he helped Ena into the waggon. "I've got where I sort of *want* things to come along and shake their fists at me. I didn't know a real happy feeling was ever as good as this."

CHAPTER XI

THE winter that followed was severe, and the long months of being practically shut in by the snow grew tedious at last. Even Ross and Ena, who made good use of the leisure the frozen fields enforced, were scarcely less demonstrative in their pleasure than the twins when the spring thaws finally set in. Dick and his father had been sadly missed, and the days were counted till their probable return.

Ross had been the head of the family all winter, and the experience had done him good. Mrs. McLane had complained on more than one occasion of his tendency to over-discipline the twins, but with this exception things had run smoothly enough.

"I don't never fear for real quarrels in the fam'ly," Mrs. McLane had confided to Ena on one occasion. "The childern are

just as clannish one with another as they can be, and one McLane will always stick up for another, no matter what. It sorter grows with 'em, too, as they grow older. There's been one or two bits o' fuss 'twixt Ross and the twins this winter, but it's 'cause he wants to lick 'em into shape too quick. There's a few years they've got to have o' bein' heathens, and they know it, and to bring 'em up too sharp is sorter cheatin' 'em out o' their birthright, and they know that too. Once they come to find out what's so and what ain't they never get to kickin' their heels aloft again, and it's a poor mother that makes a child grow up afore it has to. I ain't never been pernickety with young ones, nor set on makin' 'em over-behave theirselves. Give a child its childhood, and if it wants to take it standin' on its head, let it for sure. When they feel a hankerin' for older ways they'll take to 'em, but I ain't never one to force it. The cradle stops rockin' quick enough."

"Ross is ambitious for them," said Ena, adjusting a patch to the knee of a small stocking.

"I know he is," said Mrs. McLane approvingly, "and later on he'll find it's all right, and that he needn't ha' worried. They'll sorter justify theirselves. Jerry's goin' to be as smart as we want, and push his way real good, or else he'd never ha' been born with a red head. I guess Ross knows it all right, but he's over-anxious. He was always inclined to be, and it ain't leavin' him any. Sometimes this winter it's sorter worried me to see him work so hard over his books, but then I've remembered the tales o' many another American boy that's plugged his way up to better things just that way."

"It would worry him if he couldn't study," Ena said. It was the first time she had ever talked to Mrs. McLane on the subject.

"I guess it would, though he's worked with twice the heart since you come, Ena. He

used to have spells just before that which no one didn't quite understand. Seems a real blessin' them Californy folks acted as they did. Your Uncle Rob always wanted a girl round, but the Lord never sent nothin' but boys, and the last time two of 'em at once, same as to say that's what we got for hankerin'. One thing I'll say is, they're all good boys. A bit skittish when they're real young, and a sorter natural knack o' tormentin' the neighbours, but that don't count none——" and Mrs. McLane chuckled for several minutes over some reminiscence she did not disclose.

Dick and his father came home from the woods tired, but in good health and spirits. Robert McLane always seemed to be enveloped in a curious peace the moment work on the farm began, as if he found it answered all his yearnings.

"I heard a partridge drumming on the ridge this mornin'," he said to Ena one day. "It sorter thrilled me, too. I don't never

have to make effort to see and hear the sights and sounds o' Nature. Seems I'm right with it all the time. When the wind gets soft in the spring it seems as if every bit o' me aches to be out from dawn to dark."

Six weeks after the words were spoken Robert McLane was stricken with typhoid fever, and lay for weeks a worn and wasted wreck of his former self. The calamity overpowered the family a little at first. Good health had been so universal amongst them that the idea of sickness—and serious sickness—was something not be realised at once. The despair of it came in due course, however, and there were long days and nights of watching and anxiety, which wore even buoyant Mrs. McLane to a state of tremulousness. In the end the tide turned safely, and the long process of convalescence began.

Ena aided here. The intimate touch with sorrow and suffering called forth prema-

turely the slumbering instincts of womanhood, and when Mrs. McLane collapsed from sheer exhaustion, Ena was ready to take her place. In the hot little room her presence came as a boon to the sufferer.

"You've the natural knack," he said to her more than once. "None too many words, and yet anyone can see you understand. This is the first summer I've ever been laid aside, and it seems to me the sun never shone so hot afore. My mind goes out to the fields every minute. Everything out-doors keeps callin' me, and yet I can't raise arm nor limb to get there. I misdoubt sometimes if I'll be out for wheat harvest."

"If you don't lose heart you will. At any rate, you'll be able to sit out on the porch, and watch them in the fields," Ena soothed.

"Dick and Ross ha' had it hard this summer," Robert McLane mused, "but there's grit in both of 'em. Farmer boys don't know nothin' about sittin' in the

middle o' the lap o' luxury, but they learn sooner than the others how to stand with the shoulders back, and take things square in the jaw. There's a deal in the learnin' how to take life when you're real young. I ain't never preached to the childern, but I've sorter looked at 'em right from the cradle up same as to say I don't want 'em to think o' the world just as a play-place—leastways, not till chores is done."

Ena put her cool cheek on his hand, stopping its restless wandering over the faded quilt. "Anyway, I'm glad to be lyin' here, comin' back slow to the home-like things agen—the creakin' o' the old pump, and the roosters crowin', and the wavin' o' the wheat. If you ain't never been sick you don't know the feelin' of it, girl. Yest'day ma lifted me a bit so's I could see the barn, and I just tracked the pathway with my eye, wonderin' why I hadn't never thought how good it was to walk along it afore. But I'm most of all glad 'cause o' the childern.

Seems as if I want to see 'em pushed ahead a bit more afore the time comes for me to lie quiet for good. I want to sorter be at the back of 'em even if they don't see me there. It ain't that I'm fearsome for 'em —but it's just the feelin' the Lord puts in your heart when you peep atween the cradle-quilts for the first time, and you don't never lose it. A sorter *hoverin'* feelin'—I ain't never been able to find no word for it 'cept that."

"I know." Ena soothed as a woman might, and presently he fell asleep. When the breathing had become regular she slipped from the room and out on to the front porch. The boys were coming home from the fields, but Ena had no energy left to run to meet them. It was good enough to rest back in the old hickory-chair, and wait till Dan came to whisper that dinner was ready.

The two elder boys found little time for the sick-room, but they were constant enough in their inquiries after their father. Ena

noticed with some surprise, however, that even after convalescence was well advanced, the worried looks did not leave their faces, and she spoke of it one day to Mrs. McLane.

"They need not fear now, and yet they seem to," Ena finished, when she had explained the reason of her remarks. "Have you guessed why it is, Aunt June?"

Mrs. McLane was baking a batch of pies, and she stopped to look into the oven.

"Don't you worry none, Ena, but just keep a bright face for the sick-room. That's all we want you to do. Maybe the boys is a bit flustrated with havin' everythin' on their hands this summer, but troubles pass in time, so don't you be hinderin' 'em any by lookin' at 'em. The thing that's got to be seen to most is gettin' Rob McLane on his feet agen, and you seem to be pretty handy at doin' it."

Ena knew then that the rest of the family were in possession of some secret anxiety which was being kept from the sick-room,

and she held her peace. At the same time misgivings would come, and it was a little lonely not to be able to share them with anybody.

One afternoon the following week Uncle Ed drove over to see the invalid, and tied his horse to the hitching-post with a good deal of deliberation. Ena was in the sick-room, and she did not vacate as he entered.

"Thought I'd get along afore you was up and about again," he said to Robert McLane cheerfully, seating himself on the end of the bed. "I saw Ju in the kitchen, and she said you was to be up for awhile for the first time to-morrow. How does it feel to think o' that?"

"Good." Robert McLane smiled wearily. "I'm frettin' to be round agen. It seems as if they've kept me here longer than needs be, and a few days back Ju took it in her head to move the bed so's I don't get the view I did. Just give me your shoulder, Ed, and wheel the bed round a bit so's I

can see the land. No one don't know how tired I am o' wall-paper."

Uncle Ed hesitated a moment, then complied. "Don't you get to worryin' none," he suggested.

Robert McLane did not hear. He was straining his eyes towards the nearest wheat-field.

"It's yeller—awful yeller for wheat that's little more'n past the milk," he said, puzzled. "Is that them furrowin' in yonder field? What in the land——" He paused, straining nearer the window, and when he spoke again his voice had changed.

"It ain't yeller like that for nothin'. It's the chinch-bug, Ed! The chinch-bug is on the wheat, and you must ha' seen it good enough as you come by! Why ain't no one told me?"

"There warn't no help for it, and so what was the use o' tellin' you afore you had to know? The boys has made a plucky fight, but you know what the chinch-bug is,

'specially when it comes now. It ain't no good worryin', neither. You ain't the only one with a ruined crop."

"What with sickness, and a spoiled harvest, the Lord seems layin' His hand heavy on this little house," Robert McLane said. He was not over the shock of his discovery yet, and he was lying back in his old place.

"Not so partic'lar heavy. You're through with your sickness, and wheat-sowin'll come round again. Don't take on none, or the boys'll fairly give up," advised Uncle Ed, who knew well how to thrust forward potent suggestions. "It's real disheartenin' to 'em that this pest should ha' happened when they was workin' things all on their own. They're just sick over it."

"It ain't no fault of theirs. My! it seems as if the scent o' one trouble brings another."

"You're through with your sickness, so just give yourself up to thanksgivin' for that. We've had the chinch-bug afore, and we'll likely have it again. It ain't the hard-

est thing pioneer folks has had to fight, Rob."

"That's so." Robert McLane was already bracing himself. "Just sorter hint to the boys that it warn't no great shock, and I'm through repinin'. Do it sorter careful, Ed, so's to make 'em sure what you're sayin' is so."

Uncle Ed had risen. He nodded acquiescence, and Ena, who had sat half-forgotten, followed him out of the room, and on to the front porch. She clung to his arm, detaining him.

"What does it mean, Uncle Ed?"

"There'll be no wheat-crop," said Uncle Ed tersely. "Ju wanted me to come over and sorter break it to him to-day, knowin' he would realise right off what kind o' shape it would land 'em all in. But he took it pretty good. I knowed he would, too. Ju thought he'd take on about it. She's right off the mark sometimes, in the way she sizes up her man."

Uncle Ed was flicking a willow-switch absently, his eye on the wheat-fields.

"My crop's gone, too," he said, "but then it don't matter so much for me, 'cause I've got a fair bit o' money laid by. Howso, these things raise the fightin' blood in a man, and that ain't a bad thing to happen. If everythin' went slick our muscle'd get soft, and our blood run sorter sickenin' easy. Afore that happens to me I want to be laid aside, and I guess Rob McLane's built some the same way."

"I've been here nearly two years, and this is the first big trouble that has come," said Ena. She spoke quietly, retaining her hold on Uncle Ed's arm. "I wonder what my Uncle Hugo would say to it?"

"I don't know."

"Or any of them. There's someone else besides Uncle Hugo."

"There's your Aunt Esther, your father's sister. Ain't you never seen her?"

"No."

"She never quarrelled with your father same's she did with your Uncle Hugo, but she lived way off in Europe for years and years, and I guess that's why you ain't never seen her. Seems to me, though, that I heard she was back in Californy awhile since. She's an old maid, and a regular crank by all accounts. Had lots o' money left to her when she was young, and I guess she suspected all the young fellers that come around her wanted to fill their pockets 'stead o' their hearts. Maybe she was right, for I've heard she warn't at all a lovable woman, and had no trick o' forgivin' once she's fallen out with a person.'

"Why did she quarrel with Uncle Hugo?"

"Land knows. She had the old homestead left to her, so maybe 'twas money matters. Likely enough, I should say." Uncle Ed smiled as he walked off.

Ena went into the house with a slower step, peeping into the sick-room before she went out to the kitchen. Robert McLane

was lying quiet, and he smiled at her as she smoothed the quilt.

"You're gettin' real womanish ways with you, girl. Don't you fuss none over me. I'm lyin' nice and comfortable, and if ma should ask any about me tell her I'm just tryin' to get a wink o' sleep afore dinner-time comes along. Don't you let on, leastways for an hour or so, that I'm tryin' to do anythin' else."

CHAPTER XII

ENA sat up in the garret, writing-pad and pencil on her knee. Through the open window came the soft sound of summer rain, with now and then the rattle of buggy-wheels returning from Saturday market.

Throughout the long afternoon she had sat motionless, intent only on the matter in hand, which at last was finished. She folded her letter across and across with a sigh of relief, but finally straightened it out again to give a last and critical reading, her brow furrowed deeply with indecision. It began somewhat abruptly:

"AUNT ESTHER,

"I cannot put 'dear' in front of your name because I have never seen you, and I think it is owing to some trouble in the family which happened a long time ago.

Uncle Ed Van Orme says you are peculiar, and perhaps you may not like to receive this letter, but this is what I want to tell you.

"I came to this McLane house nearly two years ago, and I have been very happy until now. This summer Uncle Rob has been ill with typhoid, and the wheat-crop has failed, so they are going to be very poor for quite awhile. Ross will not be able to go to school again this September, and I think it will break his heart. If I leave here it will be less expense to them, and there won't be anything particular this coming winter that I can do. I wish you would help me about it all. I have thought a great deal for more than a week, but I cannot tell anyone here. I hope you will not be angry with this letter, for I am writing from a sense of Justice. I do not think Uncle Hugo just understands how things are, and I have not had a letter from him for nearly four months. I want you to write quickly, please.

"From your niece,

"ENA MARGARET CHASE."

The word "justice" had originally been

written with a small "j," but Ena had crossed this out, and finally substituted the capital letter. The phrase was one of Aunt Loosher's favourites, and Ena felt it looked well on paper, and would probably impress Aunt Esther.

A day or two before, when bewildered as to the composition of the letter, Ena had appealed indirectly to Mrs. McLane.

"What would you do, Aunt June, if you wanted to write to someone about a matter, and you were not quite sure how they would like it?"

"I should put down real plain what was in my head," Mrs. McLane had answered decisively; "no frills, and no fussin'. I don't never take time to walk round a thing I can get to straight."

Ena felt there was worth in the suggestion, and it had ruled the spirit of her letter accordingly. Now the difficulty was over, and she sighed again with satisfaction as she tucked the envelope under her pil-

low to await the first chance of mailing.

Robert McLane was about again now; a very shadowy sort of man as yet, but with gradually increasing strength. It was characteristic of the family that silence was maintained on the subject of the wheat; even Mrs. McLane seemed to have found a private reason for not descanting on it. Dick and Ross went about with the shadow lifted from their faces, but Ena's manner remained a little nervous.

Nothing was said between her and Ross on the subject of school, the impossibility of it being too well understood to need mention. Ena read the date of opening for the autumn term with a sigh, but Ross maintained a composure so complete that it was almost puzzling.

The letter had been mailed two days after writing, and Ena counted the time before an answer could arrive. She had been obliged to send it under cover to her Uncle Hugo for forwarding. If Aunt Esther was

really back in her old California home, there need be very little delay about an answer being received.

However, the days crept on, and no sign came. Ena began to lose heart, and wonder what step to take next. Mrs. McLane noticed a change in her manner, and commented on it without reserve.

"You've lost heart a bit because a stroke of bad luck has caught us clear in the back, but it ain't nothin' but foolishness to worry. You surely ought to ha' shook down to our ways enough to know that if we're beat down one time we'll bob up another."

Ena nodded, but went on washing the dishes in silence.

"If you're poor all the time you don't never know what you miss," continued Mrs. McLane. "The people I'm real sorry for is them that has had, and ain't got it any more. The only way for them to do is to sorter chuckle 'cause they've had a nip o' what the others ain't. When you're put to

bad enough you've got to look out for somethin' that's soothin' to the feelin's."

It was two days after this in the middle of the afternoon that an astounding thing happened at the farm. Mrs. McLane and Ena were taking in the morning's wash, which was always hung in front of the house to be out of the way, when Marthy Swiggs' buggy came along, Marthy herself driving. The team moved at a walking pace, and on the front seat by Marthy's side sat a resplendent sort of person who was deliberately surveying the house as she approached. Mrs. McLane saw the strange sight first, and dropped an armful of linen on the grass.

"For the land's sake! here's someone dressed so fine that it makes Marthy look sicker'n a hen with the pip. They're drivin' up here for sure."

Ena turned to look. Something in the face of the stranger seemed familiar to her, and with a cry she ran forward, stopping

the buggy just as it was turning into the yard.

"Are you Aunt Esther?"

"I guess it is," said Marthy excitedly, before anyone else had time to speak. "I found her in Creston, wonderin' how she'd ever get here. This is the McLane place, ma'am, and here's Ena. Glad to ha' helped you some."

Aunt Esther Chase was deposited on the grass somewhat abruptly, and stood leaning on her thick walking-stick, looking at Ena. For the first time in many months the girl became conscious of the faded calico dress she wore, and she made a nervous movement backwards towards Mrs. McLane—the latter having taken a position on the porch steps in order to get her regular breathing powers restored.

"Stop a minute!" The walking-stick was waved imperiously as Ena stepped back. "I'm your Aunt Esther Chase, as you seem to have guessed, and I've come to

find out things for myself. Is this the place you've been living in for the last two years?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Who is that person sitting on the steps?"

"Aunt June." Ena moved to include Mrs. McLane in the conversation, and the latter came forward hospitably, her equanimity somewhat restored.

"If you're part o' Ena's folks, I'm real glad to see you," she said, moving the clothes-pins from one hand to the other in order to give extra greeting. "Come and sit down in the porch rocker a minute while I finish takin' in the wash. Marthy's dropped your satchel on the grass there, and I'll have the twins take it up to Ena's bedroom. I reckon you've got sorter lonesome to see her, and come unexpected. It ain't a bad way at all—saves quite a lot o' fussin' and fixin' up."

Aunt Esther walked over to the porch, a slight limp becoming apparent the moment she moved.

"Ha' you got trouble with your limbs, too?" exclaimed Mrs. McLane, feeling that sympathies in common might be established at once. "It's wonderful how stiffness does take the j'ints when you get on a bit in years."

"I suffered a slight strain years ago, while mountain-climbing," explained Aunt Esther in frozen accents, noting that Ena had disappeared with the suit-case.

"And you ain't got over it, seemin'ly. People meet all sorts o' things when they travel. I presume you're home for good now?"

"Possibly."

"And took to findin' your relations. Just the same, I ain't heard Ena speak none about you."

"Ena has never seen me. I was abroad at the time she was orphaned, and I understood my brother Hugo had taken charge of her."

Mrs. McLane sniffed audibly.

"Soon got tired o' his job, I reckon. The girl came here somethin' approachin' two year ago, sayin' her uncle thought it'd be sorter healthier for her to be brought up on a farm. I scented from his letter how things was. The child was welcome enough here, if nobody else wanted her."

Aunt Esther relaxed. Mrs. McLane had piled up her basket and taken the opposite rocker.

"I wish I had been home at the time, but I was abroad, and in a sanatorium."

"She's a real good girl, and ain't never been nothin' less to us than our own," continued Mrs. McLane. "I guess there'd be a sight o' opposition to get through if there was any notion o' takin' her away now. Her ways ain't our ways, but she's got a natural politeness about her that makes it seem as if they was. I wouldn't let her go to no one who didn't treat her good, and make her feel she was just as welcome as

could be to whatever they'd got and no dependent at that."

All unconsciously Mrs. McLane had touched the right chord. Her simple manner of getting down to the raw in life won its way unerringly now. With the barrier of caste broken down, the two stood revealed for what they were—women of widely different breeding, but similar heart. Aunt Esther put out her hand in a way that was very different from the limp extension of fingers a few minutes before.

"I'll remember that," she said. "Now, if it is convenient for me to stay two or three days——"

"Sure!" Mrs. McLane rose alertly. "I'm forgettin' all about you, in talkin' about Ena. I guess she's took up your satchel, so, if you can climb the stairs here you'll find her room, and I'll go right to makin' a mess o' fried-cakes for supper."

So Aunt Esther went slowly up the stairs,

marvelling greatly at all she saw on the way. Ena was smoothing out the patchwork quilt in her bedroom with fingers that trembled ever so little. Aunt Esther watched her for a few moments in silence, rapping her stick at intervals on the floor. Then an unwonted softness came over her face. She held out her hand.

"I'm glad you wrote," she said. "Don't cry. I understand it all."

CHAPTER XIII

THE presence of Aunt Esther Chase at the farm provided a sense of novelty not easily to be described. At first a general nervousness prevailed with all but Mrs. McLane, but this wore off. Aunt Esther had evidently come prepared to take things as she found them; and if they were not what she had anticipated she did not say so.

Work went on just as usual during the next two days. There was far too much to do to be able to loiter, even for an unusual guest. Ena was the only one who had liberty accorded her, and, rocking in the sunshine on the front porch, she gave her aunt the history of the past two years.

Aunt Esther sat still and said little, but occasionally she tapped the floor with her stick. Ena learned before long that this

was a sign to be regarded, and fell to studying it accordingly. Thus she was not disappointed at the apparent taciturnity with which her narrative was received.

"I never realised there was definite trouble until this summer," Ena finished. "The day Uncle Ed came over I knew there would be lots to think about. But things are soon arranged in this house. Ross is to go into the woods next winter with his father and Dick, so that extra money can be made. Mrs. McLane is going to manage the farm with the twins."

"Is it Ross who meant to go to school this term?"

"Yes." Ena leaned her chin on her hand and stopped rocking. "He wants to be educated, and this is the second year things have happened to prevent."

"That won't hurt him, if he is the right sort of boy," said Aunt Esther grimly. "It seems to me things have been planned very

sensibly, considering the family circumstances."

Ena said nothing. An oppression which had been lightened for the last two days returned upon her. She realised that she had vaguely suspected Aunt Esther of coming as a sort of family deliverer. It seemed that this was not to be.

"I should like to meet Ed Van Orme," said Aunt Esther suddenly. "Where does he live?"

Ena roused herself. "He and Aunt Loosher are coming over this afternoon to see you. They heard of your being here yesterday. Marthy Swiggs told them. She has been dreadfully excited ever since you arrived"; and Ena smiled.

At this moment Mrs. McLane appeared from the sitting-room, a faded gingham wrapper hanging over her arms. She looked at Aunt Esther's immaculate grey gown.

"It torments me terrible to see you wearin'

that good dress in the house," she said, "and so I hunted up this gingham, so's you could put it on and save the others. You and me ain't so awful unlike in figure but what you can wear it fairly comfortable. If it's a bit wide in the waist, just lap it over, and pin it at the back."

Aunt Esther controlled her surprise gracefully.

"Thank you, but I feel very comfortable as I am, and I won't trouble you."

"It troubles me a deal more to see a good dress sorter goin' to waste," Mrs. McLane said. "If only you'd ha' thought to bring a couple o' common dresses with you!"

Aunt Esther said nothing, and looked a little nonplussed.

"You don't mean to say you ain't got no common dresses?" interrogated Mrs. McLane, scenting the situation with her usual acumen. "Leastways, nothin' commoner than what you've got on?"

"I find them very comfortable and serv-

iceable." Aunt Esther smoothed her gown, settling the cuffs apologetically. "They wash, you know," she added, hoping to impress Mrs. McLane favourably.

"I can see it, but I'd never feel I ought to have as trim a dress as that on my back, 'cept on the Fourth, or the Sabbath, or maybe a funeral. I thought when I seen you round yest'day afternoon in that red dress you was wearin' that it'd make as lovely a ball o' carpet-rags as ever was sewed. I guess you're sorter hankerin' to get it worn out, anyway," suggested Mrs. McLane enviously.

"Aunt June likes your rose linen," explained Ena, on the edge of laughter. "We sew all the dresses here into carpet-rags when they are finished with."

"You're not goin' to tell me you *don't!*" exclaimed Mrs. McLane, overpowered by such a revelation, and looking at Aunt Esther in a way which made the latter feel mentally unbalanced. "It'd be the most

sinful waste I ever heard tell of, considerin' what you wear."

"You possess more ideas than I, evidently, and probably your custom is a good one." Aunt Esther spoke politely, but rapped her stick with a significance not to be disregarded. "Ena, I wish you would bring me my work-bag."

What Aunt Esther's thoughts were as she sat sewing for the remainder of the morning could not be told. Her eyes were bent on her work, and her firmly-set lips quivered no secrets. Ena, flying from one task to another in the house, occasionally glanced towards the open door and sighed. She liked Aunt Esther Chase, but found her as yet a little inscrutable.

"She's ever so slightly like my father," Ena said to Mrs. McLane, when, later on, a mutual peeling of potatoes invited confidence. "That's why I seemed to know her as she sat by Marthy's side."

"She's an awful odd woman, with her

mouth shuttin' down on everythin' her eyes takes in," said Mrs. McLane. "That stick-rappin' business torments me, too; but I ain't complainin' serious, 'cause her heart is good. She wants to do the right thing."

Ena was on the alert that afternoon, and when Uncle Ed and Aunt Loosher drove up, she took the former at once to where Aunt Esther Chase sat sewing under the trees. Then she left the two together, divining that an acquaintanceship would be more easily formed if no third person were present.

Meanwhile Aunt Loosher had made her way with dignity to the kitchen, there to encounter Mrs. McLane. The latter stopped a moment in her bread-kneading to note that her sister wore the cherished gown of black Henrietta which had been made for old man Sorensen's funeral.

"It ain't no good, Loosher." A slight but provoking smile broadened on Mrs. McLane's lips as she turned to her kneading

again. "You ain't got a show at all in the matter o' dress, if so be you've come with the notion o' keepin' pace with Ena's aunt, and havin' her note what you can do in the way o' fashion. Just you peep through the sittin'-room window and see that red dress she's wearin' for common."

Aunt Loosher, though sorely tempted, held her own.

"I ain't come with nothin' but neighbourly feelin's, Ju, and maybe a notion that I'd like to have her see the best of us. That's only natural, I guess."

"She sees anything she wants to o' my ways," said Mrs. McLane sturdily; "and I ain't made no apologies. She's like Ena in the way she takes things. I doubt if she's so much as set her nose inside the parlour, and I ain't asked her."

Aunt Loosher unfolded a small newspaper parcel.

"I brought these two red wool mats with me, Ju, thinkin' you'd sorter like to have

'em on the parlour table, now you've got comp'ny. They smarten up the look of a room considerable, and if you've got a vase of any sort to put on 'em——"

"I ain't," said Mrs. McLane shortly. "I had a blue one, but Jerry and Dan broke it, playin' catapults, more'n a year ago. I guess you hadn't better leave them mats, Loosher. Likely somethin'll happen to 'em, and then you'll be sorry."

"Well, if she don't sit in the parlour——"

"She don't," said Mrs. McLane. "She sits on the porch, or under the trees, same's she's doin' now."

Aunt Loosher stepped softly into the sitting-room, taking up a position where she could see and not be seen. When the bread was in the oven, Mrs. McLane followed her. The common love of gossip, which smoothes down so many of the little jagged places in everyday life, brought the two on to a convivial footing again.

"She wears them clothes just for com-

mon," said Mrs. McLane, relishing her visitor's surprise; "and when I took her a gingham wrapper to sorter save 'em, she rapped her stick. I notice she ain't doin' it none to Ed. They're gettin' on real good together, and talkin' fast enough to beat the band. Seems she wanted to see him, though what for in partic'lar I don't know."

"Maybe to get better acquainted with the fam'ly," said Aunt Loosher, who was not ill pleased with the distinction shown her husband. "I won't go out till they get through, 'cause it'd seem interruptin'. She looks a bit of a crank, too, same as Ena's mother always said she was."

"She ain't no notion that her brother Hugo's ways is right, though she don't say nothin' about him 'cept to herself."

"What does Ena say to this turn o' things?"

"Nothin' whatever; we don't none of us talk till we know what's to happen."

Aunt Loosher would have liked to ask

more questions, but did not dare. A righteous contentment filled her that seeming justice had at last arrived in the person of Aunt Esther Chase, and she sat straightening her wristlets with an expression of satisfaction, which she longed to put into words.

"There won't be none of us but what'll feel sorter flat and slimpsy if so be she notions to take Ena away with her," said Mrs. McLane, who understood her sister far too well not to know what was passing in her mind. "I ain't never been sorry a minute that I took her in, so no one can't never wiggle their front finger at me same's to say I warn't in the right after all. I don't look at Rob McLane these days, nor Ross neither. There's somethin' dumb about 'em both that makes a body want to turn away quick. Here's Ena, now, and if you want to meet her aunt sorter fashionable and be real introduced, you'll have to get Ena to do it, 'cause I've got my bread to look after, and can't stop for no hanky-panky."

A little while later the whole party were together on the porch; Aunt Loosher, sitting stiffly erect in her black Henrietta, secretly amazed that so elegant and unusual a person as Aunt Esther Chase should persistently avoid the parlour. Such a state of things did not seem exactly right, and Aunt Loosher worried a little, feeling that her attempts to impress the family gentility on the stranger had been in vain.

"It ain't a bit o' use dressin' up and puttin' on comp'ny manners, with Ju sittin' there so awful home-like in her calico wrapper," Aunt Loosher decided in chagrin. "Ju never tried to make no appearance in front o' strangers, and I guess she's just as willin' as not that Ena's aunt should go back thinkin' that we ain't got a good black dress 'twixt the lot of us. Seein' how things are here, I'm glad I put mine on. I guess it's 'cause she sees there's someone in the fam'ly knows their manners that she's sorter picked out Ed for special notice. What

should ha' kep' 'em talkin' so long I don't know, but I'll hear goin' home to-night. She don't speak to me real free-and-easy, but I guess it's 'cause she sees I'm sorter diff'rent to the others."

Pleased with the idea, Aunt Loosher retired gracefully from general conversation, and fell to studying fashions, as expressed in the gown worn by the city visitor. Aunt Esther noticed this after a time, and rapped her stick; but the intimation went unregarded.

"Loosher's all wropped up in the cut o' your gown, thinkin', maybe, to make over her own," said Mrs. McLane, with sly satisfaction. "I will say, Loosher, your sleeves don't look real stylish no more. Ain't you got a bit o' the material left over, so's you could balloon 'em up some?"

"They don't want it," said Aunt Loosher, aggrieved to excess. "You know they don't, Ju, and I can't see why you want to aggravate. It ain't no use goin' to meetin'

reg'lar if it don't do you no good in your daily life."

"Maybe they suit you as well just as they are, you bein' so thin," answered Mrs. McLane, usually ready to hush the storm she stirred. "I ain't no great for fussin' over such things, anyway. Your back's the thing, not what's on it."

"All of us don't think that way," said Aunt Loosher, who had never ceased to feel she could have adorned something more distinguished than calico. "There ain't nothin' like bein' nice appearin', and I hold with everyone havin' one good dress—made sorter how you want it, 'stead o' how you have to have it."

The little passage-at-arms had not been lost on Aunt Esther, who now turned the conversation adroitly. Peace was kept for the remainder of the visit, and by the time Aunt Loosher rose to go she had been made to feel her efforts in the way of presenting

an appearance had not been in vain. Soothed and comforted, she gave a cordial invitation to her own home as she stepped into the buggy.

"I am afraid not," Aunt Esther said courteously.

"I ain't as great as some folks on leave-takin's," said Aunt Loosher, "'cause you never know what wind'll blow you together again. Just the same, if you don't give a handshake to whoever's goin', it leaves you with a sorter feelin' o' ravelled edges."

A thin hand was extended with the words, and Aunt Esther responded. Uncle Ed drew up the reins.

"I've always had a sorter curious feelin' about the real West," continued Aunt Loosher. "If ever I could rely on my knees——"

Here the buggy moved off—a little hastily, it seemed—and the rest of the remark was lost.

"Maybe I don't ought to get Loosher so riled," said Mrs. McLane repentantly, giving a farewell wave of extra vigour. "Seems as if I can't help it, though, when she's around, and I see so plain all the time just where I can aggravate her. If only she hid up her notions more I shouldn't be so awful tempted."

"Your sister Lucia means well," said Aunt Esther, feeling a platitude was the only thing adequate to the occasion. "It was friendly of her to call. She married a good, kindly man, which is more than some women have the sense to do."

"Uncle Ed is going home by the Creston road," said Ena, watching the retreating buggy curiously, as Mrs. McLane went into the house. "It's the longest way, and yet they were rather late in starting."

Aunt Esther stooped for her work-bag and unrolled a strip of embroidery. "He is obliging me over a matter," she said

quietly, "and he has promised not to delay. By the way, Ena, if you have the opportunity to pack your large trunk to-morrow, do so. It's the right thing now for us both to pick up and be going!"

CHAPTER XIV

ROSS sat with his hands round his knees in the sunshine, watching the waggon wind slowly down from the ridge to the road. Dick and the twins were in it, driving home from the fields to the noon-day meal. Ross, left behind, watched them half absently till they turned in amongst the trees near the house; then his head dropped down on his folded arms, and he sat silently, quite forgetful of the dinner-pail at his side.

This was Ena's last day at the farm. The seven o'clock train that left Creston the following morning would bear away with it the august form of Aunt Esther Chase, and the slim girl she had stolen from the Wisconsin farm. For a theft it was, in the eyes of Ross, and between resentment and dismay the last few days had been the most forlorn

of all his life. It was not his custom to meet any situation with words, so that untoward events never had the chance of being mitigated by the joy of discussion. In this way he was like his father, who had lived in a whirlwind of words ever since his marriage, and still remained outwardly impassive.

Ena had become so much a part of his life by now that it was impossible to imagine the daily routine going on without her. Ross felt as lost as a child in the dark when he tried to do so, and involuntarily his mind went back to the first evening of her arrival, when he had been compelled to retire to the woodshed in order to recover from the excitement her coming had brought. For from the first she had been something familiar as well as unusual to him—the realisation of a dream come to him aforetimes from the land of his shadowy ambitions. It seemed hard that her guiding hand must fall from his clasp now.

The hot sun beat on the boy's neck, but he kept his face hidden on his knee long after the grinding of the waggon-wheels had ceased. Thus he did not see a slender figure running across the fields towards him with feet that seemed winged, and the first intimation of Ena's presence was Ena herself standing before him.

"Ross!" She threw herself down by his side, gasping a little for breath. "I couldn't wait a minute to tell you. Aunt Esther and Uncle Ed have been planning about you, and you are to begin school this term, after all."

Ena understood too well to expect ejaculations, but she leaned a little closer at the look in Ross's eyes. "Everything is arranged," she continued more quietly. "Mr. Wrightson wants a boy to do chores on his farm morning and evening, with the whole day left free for school, and Uncle Ed has fixed things so that you go. Aunt Esther and your mother talked about it in the par-

lour for nearly a quarter of an hour, and when they came out Aunt June said I might come up and tell you there wouldn't be the need for you to go to the woods the same as had been planned for. I noticed Aunt Esther was rapping her stick all the time in the parlour."

Boy and girl laughed together, and the feeling of tension melted.

"Only think it has come true at last, after all our plans," Ena said eagerly. "You must write me all about your high-school work."

Remembrance came back to Ross suddenly, and his shoulders sunk. "But you're going," he said dully. "I'll be alone."

"You won't." Ena slipped her brown fingers into his large, work-worn hands. "I shall think of you in some way every day—and thought is everything. You would know that if you had ever loved anyone and lost them awhile." Her eyes shadowed a moment at remembrances of the parents of

whom she never spoke. "You never need feel alone," she added softly. "I shall know exactly what your life is, and that will make it easier for you to *hear* me thinking about you."

Ross sat silent. As far as comfort could be given she had given it. The old courage began to throb again at his heart uncertainly; the resolution to achieve lightened his eyes.

"That's right." Ena smiled up at him with rare sweetness. "It's the only way, you know! We shall have those talks up in the garret to remember. It seems so good to feel that the time has come *to begin.*"

She rose, tying back the cloud of curls that had been loosened in running. All her active, practical nature was alert again. Ross caught the flame of it, as he had often done before.

"I forgot my dinner, too." Ena laughed, pointing to the unopened pail. "Let's share

up now, and then I must go back. What a good world it is, Ross!"

So she changed the spirit of his dream, and they sat in the sunshine together, talking of the wonderful things that had happened. And after she had gone—turning to wave back at him once or twice—he set to work, with shoulders squared to resolution. Since she asked courage sooner than repining, it was only loyal in him to give it! Absent or present, there must be no disappointing her!

When Ena got back to the kitchen, she found Mrs. McLane busy surveying two somewhat fanciful-looking bottles standing on the table.

"They're meant for vases," she said in explanation; "and Prue Perkins sent 'em for you. She's stuffed 'em alternate with red calico and salt, to make 'em look real bright and pretty. It seems an awful waste o' salt, and I don't know if it's what your Aunt Esther'd think just artistic," pondered

Mrs. McLane; "but Prue sent 'em with a good heart, and so I guess you'd better stuff 'em in your trunk."

Ena clasped the two bottles, touched more nearly to tears than laughter.

"Mandy brought 'em, and was real sorry not to say good-bye, but I told her it was just as well. I ain't no great on makin' a specialty o' the lonesome things that comes up in a body's life. I'll say, though, that you've made a sight o' friends since you've been here, and that's not a clear two year yet. It's your mother's way you've got. I guess you caught her smiles for good."

Mrs. McLane was pushing an extra large stick of wood in the stove.

"I'm goin' to make you a mess o' fried cakes to take on the journey," she said, going from one subject to another, with the unconscious irrelevance which annoyed her family and amused strangers. "You won't find the vittles on the train none too good

and wholesome—just a dab o' this and a dab o' that, and nothin' to fill up your stomach good and plenty. I ain't never tried it, o' course, but I've heerd about it more'n once, and I sense from what your Aunt Esther allows that there ain't no exaggerations. Just the same, when I offered to put a couple o' baskets o' good wholesome vittles—some of it my best pickled pork—she wouldn't hear to it. How d'you think you'll get on with her notional ways, Ena?"

Mrs. McLane paused in interest. Ena laughed.

"You said her heart was good, Aunt June."

"So it is," admitted Mrs. McLane. "I'm glad you sense that that's the chief thing. Just so long as you can dive down and not find meanness in a body, you can shape 'em up somehow to suit yourself. You'll do more shapin' than bein' shaped, anyway," finished Mrs. McLane, with penetration. "See how you can coax round Ross, and him

so set in his ways from the cradle up. I'll bet he thought this goin' to school was some o' your fixin'. Didn't he take it real quiet?"

Ena nodded assent.

"Like his father," commented Mrs. McLane. "Howso, I know what it means to the boy, and I'm real glad. He always was mortal peculiar and sorter sombre for a young one. Never stood on his head enough; but I've heard tell more'n once o' people who took their age afore their youth, and so I ain't never worried none. I read once that it was a good way to do, for people who'd got the 'get-there' feelin' in 'em, and maybe that's so. Anyway, I ain't got no fears for Ross, since things has just happened to slide round so's to give him a hold."

Filled with this cheerful philosophy of chance, Mrs. McLane finished the fried cakes, and Ena went upstairs smiling a little. She had not ventured to point to anything beyond what Mrs. McLane saw, knowing disillusion to be impossible.

In spite of Mrs. McLane's persistent air of nonchalance, there was something depressing in the atmosphere of the farmhouse that evening. Ross came home for supper, but vanished again directly afterwards, and when Ena went up to bed the garret room was still empty. She sat down for a moment in the strange little chamber of dreams, thinking over the past, and wondering about the future; wishing, with all the impatience of fifteen, that the veil could be lifted a little.

Robert McLane had put his hand tremulously on Ena's curls in saying good-night, and evidently he wished that to mean farewell, for he did not appear the next morning. Aunt Esther, in the gown of rose linen which presented such perpetual possibilities to Mrs. McLane, descended betimes, and seemed active everywhere.

"Come to see if I ain't got a notion o' tuckin' a basket o' vittles in somewhere at the last moment," pronounced Mc-

Lane. "Don't you tell her about them fried cakes, Ena, till you're well on the way, and then I'll warrant she'll be glad enough I had the contrariness to put 'em in. I'm bound to say that if she and me lived together there'd be a pernickety time tryin' to keep one ahead o' the other."

Greatly to Ena's surprise, it was Mrs. McLane who broke down when the moment for parting came. Dick and the twins had kissed good-bye stoically, but Mrs. McLane brought the corner of her gingham apron to her eye.

"I've been so busy fortifyin' everyone else that I ain't had no time to brace up myself," she explained apologetically. "Land sakes, Ena! don't you start cryin' too, but get in the buggy, 'cause Ross is waitin'. I shall be all right just when the first thing takes my 'tention off."

The prophecy proved almost instant in its fulfilment, for, as Ena stepped rather falteringly into the buggy, and Aunt Esther

Chase moved to give her room, the glint of the latter's gown caught Mrs. McLane's eye, and reminded her of a forgotten injunction. She ran forward in a hurry.

"You be sure to send me that red dress when your aunt's clear got through with it," she whispered anxiously, as Ena bent her head. "I'll be awful disappointed if you forget, Ena. It'll make just a lovely stripe in a rag-carpet."

* * * * *

The drive to Creston was a cheerful one, in spite of the circumstances. Aunt Esther seemed less contemplative than usual, and talked freely. Thus, at the last moment, she opened up a new side of her character to Ross.

Just a mile before Creston was reached they passed the Wrightson farm. Ena made Ross drive slowly, so that she could take in the details of the place, which she had never noticed particularly before; and Aunt Esther put on her eyeglasses with an

air of criticism which gradually melted to approbation. Much too wise to administer any little homily to Ross concerning his future, she refrained from comment of any sort, and sat in silence till the "depot" was reached.

The train was already at the platform. Ross looked at it with a sense of sudden shock, the desolation of the last moment full upon him. Deliberately he turned away, throwing an arm round old Libby's neck. His heart was beating quickly, with a strange, new feeling he did not understand, and, like one in a dream, he turned, to find Ena at his side. She drew down his head and kissed him on the lips.

"Good-bye." For a moment she clung to him in a way that made him protector. "I don't feel that it is farewell, you know. I don't believe it is really going to be good-bye."

THE END

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